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LITERARY CRITICISM

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A Study of Values in Literature

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Ubi Magnitudo, ibi Veritas.
—St. Augustine

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PART I. VALUE

Preface ix

I Introduction—The Problem 3
II The Reader 18
III The Question of Form 38
IV The Problem of Communication—Style 65
V The Problem of Communication—Imagery 93
VI The Question of Value 122
VII The Secret of Greatness 148
VIII Minor or Mediocre 179
IX Poetry and Religion 194
X Science and Poetry 212

PART II. VALUES

XI The Question of Genres 233
XII Tragedy 249
XIII Comedy 285
XIV The Lyric and The Essay 320
XV The Epic—Prose Fiction 360
XVI Conclusion 397

Appendix

I. Bibliography 407
II. Suggestions for Study 420

Index of Names and Subjects 423

PREFACE

"La dernière chose qu'on trouve en faisant un ouvrage, est de savoir celle qu'il faut mettre la première." I have wondered if Pascal, who wrote these wise lines, was thinking of Prefaces and the like. I should, I suppose, explain why I have had the temerity to lay hands on a thing so abundantly taken care of by its friends, and enemies, as Literary Criticism. There is the new work by Richards, the lectures by Middleton Murry and Lascelles Abercrombie, to name only three. And from these and others too numerous to mention I have profited much. Yet these and others like them treat only special phases of the subject. The most recent and excellent book by Scott-James, on the other hand, is largely historical in its method. It seemed to me that a fairly logical and comprehensive treatment was desirable.

The subject again has its obvious fascination. For even under the best of circumstances it is difficult for the untrained reader to catch the notion that there is a very genuine difference between the good and the spurious, so widespread is the theory that it is the pure function of literature to please. If one distrusts this "goose-flesh" theory of values, the alternative seems by force of logic to be the coma of moral edification. Is this a final dilemma? One may, I hope, confess a love of the poem or the music that makes one conscious of tingling nerves and icy chills, and yet feel assured that somewhere an answer may be found for this question, the one that troubled Plato:

> And we may further grant to those of her defenders who are lovers of poetry and yet not poets the permission to speak in prose in her behalf: let them show not only that she is pleasant but also useful to States and to human life, and we will listen in a kindly spirit; for if

this can be proved we shall surely be the gainers—I mean, if there is a use in poetry as well as a delight?

The pages that follow are such an attempt, and only too obviously in prose. It would be idle to claim for them any merit of originality; for the final answer to Plato can be read in Aristotle's *Rhetoric, Poetics,* and *Ethics*. But more modern schools of critics have at various times tended to lose the issue or consciously to deny it; and rarely has the whole relevancy of literature to the idea of the good life been more obscured than in these latter days of triumphant progress. If I could discover any adequate apology to offer, it would be this—the effort seems timely to assert anew the vital need of a true understanding of the value of literature.

The book is a composite of courses of lectures that I have delivered at the University of Wisconsin; yet I hope I shall not deserve too much the reproach, or the scorn, of Flaubert—the sentence Mr. Spingarn uses at the beginning of his *Creative Criticism* —"What droll creatures these college professors are whenever they talk about art." I hope that sometime the illusion may be spilled, that there is a deal of the simulacrum in the academic life.

I have selected the subtitle—*A Study of Values in Literature*—advisedly: the First Part deals with the theory of value, the Second Part with values in the several forms or types of literature. It will be patent to even a casual reader, that in the selection of the types to be studied I have been consistent only in the first two —Tragedy and Comedy—and that in the next two chapters I have followed the customary method, one that in an earlier chapter I had criticized. I should further apologize for the somewhat cavalier manner in which I dismiss fiction, treating only one of its tendencies—but the one most significant today. The subject is large, and as such better fitted for a whole volume, as it has been excellently treated by many able hands. For these and for the other inconsistencies I here make my confession; in such cases the force of habit—not mine entirely—has been too strong for me. A word might also be said about the quotations. An author, and

especially a critic, is judged, I know, by the quality of his quotations. But as for quantity, I have offended perhaps on the side of economy. The reader can, I think, here use his originality and judgment. There should be a limit to the size of books.

One word more—from the beginning it will be seen that I raise questions only to dismiss them for later consideration. This attitude, like that of the judge who sets distant dates for trials, will deserve and receive, I hope, a measure of charity.

I have been sparing of footnotes and other scholarly paraphernalia that deceive no one; but I have been careful, I believe, in rootnotes to give credit to those to whom I am indebted for definite borrowings. But if I were to give the names of the books and persons to whom I am indebted for the plan and idea of the book, I should make a list of my creditors too long for anything save the Appendix. In this Appendix too will be found suggestions for the use of the book in classes or by persons who desire to supplement it by excursions in the field of literary judgment. I sincerely hope that in this I have avoided the Serbonian Bog of pedantry.

May I here record my very real debt to my colleague in the department, Mr. A. Lloyd Wheeler, who has read the manuscript and proof, patiently and disinterestedly, and offered numerous and valuable suggestions. I hasten to add, however, that he is in no way to be made responsible for the book's blemishes. But may I record my chief gratitude to my students in Comparative Literature 165, who by their loyal coöperation made of this, I hope, something more than a penitential exercise.

P. M. B., Jr.

Madison, Wisconsin
November 1929

Part One
VALUE

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEM

CRITICISM AND JUDGMENT—READING AND LITERATURE—READING TO UNDERSTAND—THE QUESTION OF OBSCURITY—READING AND TASTE—READING AND VALUE—VALUE AND CONTENT—THE DOGMATIC ANSWER—THE IMPRESSIONIST ANSWER—THE QUESTION OF VALUE.

In spite of the fact that the last century has given us a multitude of brilliant critics in nearly every European literature—men like De Quincey and Matthew Arnold, Sainte-Beuve and Anatole France, Von Hoffmansthal and Kerr, Lowell and William Dean Howells; in spite of the fact that today in our less trivial journals the work of critics like Canby and Mencken commands our delighted attention, the feeling yet prevails, even in many respectable quarters, that criticism is a highly specialized function demanding some secret and uncommunicable faculty, and that at best it is only remotely connected with the far more vital question of reading and the enjoyment of literature. If I may be permitted a somewhat exaggerated figure, the critic is not greatly unlike the African witch doctor, so we are tempted to think, a personage with strange esoteric powers, not to be called upon for the ordinary affairs of daily life, and to be treated with serious and distant respect. Or to change the figure, in his office he is a modern counterpart of the old Puritan clergyman, a standing reproach to our conscience, but also one whom in our callous indifference we are only too ready to ignore, for his austere doctrine of pains and penalties has little in common with our frank and fearless acceptance of the sheer joy of living. There is a suggestion of this attitude in a remark by Jules Lemaître on Brunetière's study of

Flaubert, *"Rien ne manque à cette étude au moins en ce qui regarde* Madame Bovary, *que l'accent de la sympathie,"* nothing is lacking save sympathy. Out of the lion's mouth how can there come forth sweetness?

Can it be otherwise? The critic is a judge. He reads to pronounce judgment. How can a personage who has assumed the judicial air and robes allow his mind to be swayed by trifles and stoop so low as to enjoy with uncritical pleasure the book against which he must utter a sentence? Precisely. In this last we have the usually accepted interpretation of the function of the critic and criticism. Mistaking the large difference between the criminal judge and the literary judge, we are too apt to see in the latter only the power to sentence and the mental squint that looks only for criminal tendencies in every book brought before his bar.

This attitude forgets that many of the greatest creators of literature were also critics; and that of our greatest critics a goodly number were famous as poets or novelists. Aristophanes, the comic poet, has left us in his comedies one or two excellent pieces of literary criticism. Horace took time out in his singing to give us an *Ars Poetica.* Dante wrote a most excellent treatise on poetry and poetic diction. Goethe and Coleridge were among the soundest of critical judges that ever lived; and we might extend the list indefinitely. It is quite false to say that the critic is an unripe poet or novelist, or that for want of the creative gift, he has gone in for castigating the creators.

Nor is the critic essentially different from the everyday variety of reader. In fact the true critic is not essentially different from even the most elementary reader, only he reads more intelligently and therein lies all of his secret. But before we follow this distinction between the general reader and the critic, it will be well to adopt a provisional definition of what is here meant by reading. Much of our reading is necessarily done with the purely utilitarian object of increasing our store of available information. Of such is most of the interest we discover in the newspaper, in our textbooks, in scientific books and journals, anything that has as its object chiefly or exclusively to widen the range of knowledge. That this

is vitally important there is no one who can for a moment deny. The aim of criticism of such reading is almost exclusively that of the specialist—is the information accurate or misleading or false? With this type of reading, however, I am not at present concerned.

There is, on the other hand, a vast amount of reading, if one may judge by the numbers of magazines and books published and sold, which is only indirectly or not at all concerned with the question of information. De Quincey has called this "literature of power" as distinguished from "literature of knowledge." It is concerned with giving us experience rather than information, its vital connection with our emotional life we cannot overlook, and its value, in so far as it affects our minds and lives, we shall find is a matter of supreme importance. Let us for the present call this imaginative literature, though the phrase cries for instant definition. It is of this type—which includes nearly all of the poetry, stories, history, travel, biography, novels, as also most of the essays, and, perhaps, literary criticism, that we find in the books and magazines that clutter our tables and book shelves,—it is of this type that I wish to speak.

To return—it is not difficult to generalize and describe the first and most obvious effects of an effort to read. It is best, however, to begin with an illustration. Nearly all in childhood have had to commit to memory Longfellow's *Wreck of the Hesperus*. Whatever may have been the original attitude, there can be little doubt that on a re-reading the poem will nearly always leave one bored. And the reason should be obvious, even to a person who has no pretensions to critical ability. The experience of the shipwreck and the drowning girl, though sentimentally pathetic, has offered all of its emotional value at the first encounter; it is understood fully and immediately; there are no residual discoveries possible. In consequence, when one re-reads one merely repeats an easy experience, and repetition quickly passes into boredom. In the same way we can account for the fact that after a time even a shallow reader will become dissatisfied with the monotonous similarity of the average movie plots and cheap magazine fiction.

The experience of the picture or the story is too easy; there is not enough of the new to stimulate the imagination. In this way it is most emphatically true that familiarity breeds, not necessarily contempt, but at least lack of interest. No one can grow enthusiastic over the multiplication table, or wax imaginative over the Pythagorean theorem in geometry, great as may have been the joy of the first unknown discoverer.

Contrast with this the ever-recurring pleasure one experiences in re-reading such a ballad as *Sir Patrick Spens*. Like Longfellow's, it is a story of a shipwreck and the drowning of a girl, but with a difference; and it is this slight difference that makes for great literature, literature that refuses to put all its wealth in the window, but reveals a precious trifle of something new upon every repeated visit. Pleasure always accompanies the exercise of the imagination in reading something that one can understand, perhaps not fully at first, but sufficiently to give a genuine and vital experience. One is pleased by the experience of Shakespeare's *As You Like It* or Hardy's *Return of the Native,* though the two experiences are similar in no particular. One can, if one has the power, be pleased even by the experience of Sophocles' *Œdipus, the King,* or Shakespeare's *King Lear,* as well as by Pippa's song in *Pippa Passes,* or by *Omar Khayyám;* though here again we have experiences of the greatest possible range in depth and variety.

Again, a reading experience, if it be properly understood, may bring only a feeling of pain. I trust it is obvious that here we are not thinking of tragedy, for though there is pain in tragedy there are, or should be, certain definite compensations which more than atone for the pain and give a pleasure of the most exalted, though also of the most complex sort. It is difficult, however, to read some of the plays of Ibsen or of Gorky or of John Galsworthy or of Eugene O'Neill, without having the heartstrings vibrate excruciatingly. The experience may be valuable, and probably is; for pain also in real life is often a necessary protection against danger and death. Nor is it always the business of literature to give pleasure. There is something of the same pain

in satire. And in all of these the pain will be more intense as we more successfully catch the significance of the full experience.

Very different is the feeling of bewilderment which all experience when the poem or story or play is not understood, owing to obscurity either of language or of thought. The blankness of mind accompanying an attempt to follow a sentence in a language only partly understood is an experience anyone can readily call to memory. The feeling of discomfort when one is attempting to follow a piece of mathematical reasoning a shade beyond one's powers is not essentially dissimilar. I recall something of the same distress not very long ago, on the part, too, of an otherwise excellent reader, when he first saw this short poem by Thomas Hardy:

> Only a man harrowing clods
> In a slow silent walk
> With an old horse that stumbles and nods
> Half asleep as they stalk.
>
> Only thin smoke without flame
> From the heaps of couch-grass:
> Yet this will go onward the same
> Though Dynasties pass.
>
> Yonder a maid and her wight
> Come whispering by:
> War's annals will cloud into night
> Ere their story die.[1]

The smoke without flame from the heaps of *couch-grass,* and the village maid and her *wight,* with the two unnecessarily rare words for so downright a poem, were a bit disturbing and their significance not quite clear. With these important elements in the poem vague, the significance of the whole experience was blurred, and the reader left with a painful feeling of some loss.

It means little, in the case of a poem like this, whether two persons read into it the same experience. Curiously, two found

[1] From *In the Time of the "Breaking of the Nations,"* copyright 1915; printed by permission of The Macmillan Company.

that they were reading two different poems. For one the piles of couch-grass with their thin smoke were the débris of weeds which must be burned to save the hay; for the other they were the primitive and heavily thatched cottages with their trickle of smoke. In either case the essential quality of the experience remains unaltered—the age-long and unchanging life of the simple peasant in contrast with the rapid and futile circumstance of history with its story of wars and dynasties and change.

Similarly, a lack of acquaintance with classical mythology will make Milton for many a difficult author; as a lack of a background of mediæval chivalry may make Scott's poetic romances somewhat obscure; or an unfamiliarity with the ideas and practices of the Italian Renaissance will keep one from enjoying many of Browning's dramatic monologues—for example, *My Last Duchess*. But there is one deeper cause for the only too frequent inability to understand a poem, a play, or a novel, and this lies at the very heart of the personality of the perplexed reader.

Here is a short poem by William Blake, which has been given the fairly obvious title, *Love's Secret,* that has caused not a little difficulty with some less experienced readers.

Never seek to tell thy love,
Love that never told can be;
For the gentle wind doth move
Silently, invisibly.

I told my love, I told my love,
I told her all my heart,
Trembling, cold, in ghastly fears.
Ah! She doth depart!

Soon as she was gone from me,
A traveler came by,
Silently, invisibly;
He took her with a sigh.

The poem to some people is undoubtedly obscure; and if so, the reason lies in the unusual attitude of the lover. Nearly all of

our conventional attitudes toward love, such attitudes as are given us by the more accessible and easier levels of literature, are of quite a different variety. With a background of such experiences a reader finds it difficult to adjust himself to this novel mental effort. It is as though a child who had always crept should be suddenly asked to stand up and walk. It is the same lack of mental suppleness that keeps many people from enjoying tragedy. To such, Shakespeare's *Lear* must and will always be a book sealed with the seven seals.

It is hardly just to say that every reader stops thus to analyze his experiences while reading; but whether the process be conscious or not, one of the things I have tried to describe takes place in his mind and enters into his final attitude toward the book. He is bored, pleased, pained, or bewildered by what he reads. In this important respect he differs not a whit from the most highly qualified critic; adequate reading is by its very nature critical. And whether we profess it or not, we are all more or less amateur critics. Only the critic tries to carry the process one step farther; he usually feels somewhat dissatisfied with a judgment which rests purely on pleasure or pain, and wishes, if he can, to bolster his attitude with some acceptable standard of value.

But we have gone far enough to see that a good critic must first of all be a good reader. For how can he hope to secure a sympathetic hearing if his judgments are not founded upon a most delicate taste? It was said effectively, and practiced as effectively, by Sainte-Beuve, "The critic is nothing more than a person who knows how to read and can teach others." The full implication of this ability of an ideal reader will need to be explored later; nor is it something easily acquired. Just as the ideal poet is a gift from heaven, endowed with a rich and varied experience, so the ideal reader for the poet must be a being with not much lower gifts. One cannot stand in the presence of the great without some adequate card of admission.

By tradition, at least, the critic has felt, with perhaps justifiable self-consciousness, that his task was one of considerable social value. Nearly always he has been too tender-minded to depend

solely on his taste; or perhaps it would be safer to say that he has sought for some higher grounds for his faith in the justice of his taste. Not many have had the large self-confidence of a Samuel Johnson who could browbeat opposition into silence. The *arbiter elegantiarum* in nearly every case would prefer to have some higher judgment than his own before which to bring literary malefactors; it is so much easier to have some formula, *le roi le veut.* But, as in everything else, it has been difficult for critics to agree with anything approaching unanimity upon any standards; and thus the history of critical thought has been the story of partially abandoned theories, and the confident definition of new articles of belief, from the early speculation of Plato down to the interesting practice of Croce. Thus it is that we have the various schools of critics, the Classicists, the Romanticists, the Impressionists, the Historico-Scientific, the Expressionists, the Psychological, —the name is legion. It is not the purpose here to discuss in detail any of these various systems. Professor George Saintsbury, who undertook the herculean task of writing a history of criticism, has left us three mighty volumes as a monument to his sedulous reading. Before these any person in search of a critical theory which might enable him to judge his own reading may well stand aghast. In all this wilderness of anxious guides one stands as irresolute and dismayed as a visitor beset in a foreign city by an army of clamoring dragomen.

The truth is that it is no easy or offhand matter to give the reasons for one's preference of one book to another. Obviously it is impossible to compare two objects which belong to two quite different classes. One would hardly dream of comparing Milton's sonnet *On His Blindness* with Shakespeare's *King Lear.* One might as well, to use Professor Royce's phrase, attempt a comparison between a poet and a strawberry. But even of things in the same class there are times when it is difficult to find adequate reasons for a judgment; for example, why is it that Hardy's *Return of the Native* is greater in every respect than Theodore Dreiser's *American Tragedy?* Obviously, the critic's is not an easy

rôle, and the problem of the function of the critic is not a little complicated.

For the critic must first of all understand the character and even as it were the personality, that is, something of the whole texture of the experience that he is reading. It is not enough merely to repeat the plot, or to describe in vague generalities its character. He must have lived the experience, and to that extent have entered into its life. In a manner not essentially dissimilar we associate with and enjoy our friends, but how seldom are we able to give an adequate description of their characters or of their value. We hear their words and observe their actions, and above all know that vital response in our own minds and emotions called out by their presence; but we so often pitifully fail in the justice of the final assessment of what they are. In consequence most people are content simply to enjoy their friends, as they do their favorite reading, and ask no perplexing residual questions.

A resolute variety of critical theory much in vogue a few years ago, and not yet unpopular in high places, used to make a clear-cut distinction between the thought, or the content of a work, and the form of its expression.[1] This looked simple and reasonable. If the writer violated none of the rules of good usage or rhetoric, and, in the case of poetry, if the language was musical and the rhymes well bestowed and the stanzas or verses skillfully managed, then so far as form was concerned the piece was above reproach, and the critic could attack the matter. If that also met his approval, if what was said was sufficiently true, or beautiful, or adequate to arouse the reader to benevolent or sincere ideas, then the poem or prose was adequate, and perhaps even good. The process was not greatly dissimilar to the manner in which an unskillful critic might view a painting, looking first at the technique and then at the object represented; and if the colors were well massed and the landscape recognizable, approve the picture. Using much the same critical apparatus, many persons have severely condemned the sculpture of Rodin and Epstein for

[1] It is obvious, I hope, that I am not using this word with the meaning given to it by Croce and his school.

their rude technique and their inability to make their subjects look other than like morons or monsters.

Applying this simple rule-of-thumb method of naïve criticism, there would be no great difficulty perhaps in passing a judgment, of a sort, on a piece of poetry like the following:[1]

> Lo, the poor Indian! whose untutor'd mind
> Sees God in clouds, or hears him in the wind:
> His soul, proud Science never taught to stray
> Far as the solar walk, or milky way;
> Yet simple Nature to his hope has giv'n,
> Behind the cloud-topt hill, an humbler heav'n;
> Some safer world in depth of woods embrac'd,
> Some happier island in the wat'ry waste,
> Where slaves once more their native land behold,
> No fiends torment, no Christians thirst for gold.
> To Be, contents his natural desire,
> He asks no Angel's wing, no Seraph's fire;
> But thinks, admitted to that equal sky,
> His faithful dog shall bear him company.

There is no question here either of the skill and satisfying character of the verse, or of the valuable matter in the thought. But contrast with it this from the Chorus from *Atalanta* by Swinburne:

> When the hounds of spring are on winter's traces,
> The mother of months in meadow or plain
> Fills the shadows and windy places
> With lisp of leaves and ripple of rain;
> And the brown bright nightingale amorous
> Is half assuaged for Itylus,
> For the Thracian ships and the foreign faces,
> The tongueless vigil, and all the pain.
>
> Come with bows bent and with emptying of quivers,
> Maiden most perfect, lady of light,
> With a noise of winds and many rivers,
> With a clamour of waters, and with might;

[1] From Pope's *Essay on Man.*

Bind on thy sandals, O thou most fleet,
Over the splendour and speed of thy feet;
For the faint east quickens, the wan west shivers,
Round the feet of the day and the feet of the night.

No one can question here, if he read the poem aloud, the incantation of the verse. There is magic in the quality of it that makes Pope's couplets seem a trifle pedestrian in their sober march. But what is it "all about"? What is the content? Nor is Swinburne's poetry unique in this respect of giving us a magical experience without telling us much about its precise significance. Shall we therefore reject his poetry as lacking value because we cannot set its thought down in words and weigh its worth? Or, what is much more likely to be true, is the connection between the words, the rhythms, and the whole expression of a piece of literature, and what we call its content, something far more intimate and organic than most ready-made criticism can understand?

The critic-poet, Aristophanes, has a clean fling at just such offhand, easy criticism in his comedy, *The Frogs*. Dionysos has gone to the lower world to visit the tragic poets, for the tragic stage in Athens is now deserted by great poetry. He has the two rivals, Æschylus and Euripides, up for trial to see which of them is the better qualified to mend the manners of the decadent Athenians. In the lower world all things are possible; and a huge pair of scales is brought forward, the two poets are put each against the other, and, heads down, made to recite their verses into the pans, that their respective worth may be manifest to all. Unfortunately, so far our psychologists have not been able to aid us by devising a similar apparatus for use on earth.

For, like Aristophanes, all readers and thinkers are convinced that there must be some value to literature and reading, which in some intimate manner is connected with the well-being of society and the individual. This has been the longest lived and the most insistent of all critical traditions. We meet it first in Plato, who in an attack of puritan impatience banished poetry from his Republic. Poetry is an imitation, he tells us, and as such must *per se*

be of less value than the reality. Furthermore, all poets good and bad had offended by holding up to their readers pictures of life that were far from morally edifying. How can the wise legislator then permit the enthusiasm of youth and the seriousness of age to be debauched by the reprehensible spectacle? And this attitude of Plato is one not unknown even in this day of enlightened liberalism. Horace, too, was, in this one respect only, somewhat of a literary puritan. Himself he might sing the charm of sweetly smiling Lalage's, but he would allow none of the coarseness of Latin comedy, and poetry for the educating of youth and age must "mix the useful with the sweet." Even Molière, the greatest comic poet, next to Aristophanes, the world has ever known, apologizes for his calling by claiming for comedy the prophetic office of castigating vice. One may expect Brunetière, almost of our own time, to thunder in the index, for he took his task of critic very seriously; but George Bernard Shaw nowhere shows himself more the successor of Molière than in his conviction that the office of poetry and especially of comedy is moral.

All this we can most devoutly believe; but it is when we attempt, in the dogmatic manner, to discover the vital connection between literature and morals that difficulties begin to multiply. For it cannot be a purely objective and obvious moral that the story or poem carries on its face like an illuminated text. Coleridge himself confessed that the moralizing tacked on to his *Ancient Mariner* really was a blemish; and it was Keats who pronounced such gratuitous efforts to preach not unlike the action of a person who slips a hand into one's pocket. One does feel a bit defrauded when at the conclusion of an otherwise delightful poem or tale one is brought face to face with an obvious effort to improve. It is like being invited out to dinner and then having to pay for the entertainment. Otherwise the best works of literature would be homilies and collections of proverbs. But readers in general are convinced that precisely these, unless there be some large compensation, are dull and at times even unreadable. Evidently "mixing the useful with the sweet" is a perilous task. It is a brew that usually is somewhat of a soporific.

But the problem is still more complicated. What shall be the attitude of the critic toward a work which has as its background a theory of life, or an attitude toward life, that conventionally at least is blacklisted? I am thinking now of Homer's *Iliad,* which without much difficulty may be regarded as an epic in praise of the glory and immortal circumstance of war, or of the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyám* which, to say the least, should offend in many high places. Shall these two immortal poems, because their authors hold views highly unorthodox today, be banned by a conscientious critic; or shall they be praised, as they have always been, for qualities which somehow even the most conscientious moralist, like Plato with the *Iliad,* cannot but admire and even love?

The whole problem of criticism, moreover, is not assisted by the fact that literature is as manifold and as unexpected as life itself, *varium et mutabile semper*; age cannot wither nor custom stale its infinite variety. There are tragedy and comedy and satire, the epic and fiction, the essay, lyric poetry, the dissertation, the oration, history and biography—the list is indefinite and expanding ever. It is obvious that one does not read satire with the same mental attitude as tragedy or lyric poetry. It becomes necessary to discuss the process of tragedy, for example, and to contrast it with that of comedy or of satire. When Aristotle wrote his immortal *Poetics* and *Rhetoric* he had before him the example of Greece alone; and the variety of illustrious works it had to offer for study was yet comparatively limited. But with us it is not only one literature, but a multitude of which we are compelled to make a comparative study. And in this multitude there are forms or types of which Aristotle had not yet dreamed. Of all this the well-equipped critic must take careful cognizance.

Dismayed by these difficulties in finding some simple formula which all readers will accept, and fortified in their dismay by some solid reasons of their own, there have been of late some hardy-minded critics who frankly confess the impossibility of going beyond the mere pleasure or pain or bewilderment the reader discovers in an experience of reading. Why try to go

behind the returns, when we have at least one fact of such vital significance so obviously at hand? Each experience is a separate and unique adventure to be judged solely on its own merits, and like the Creator we can pronounce on its character by its effect upon us; it is futile to look for agreements or to generalize by the effects which we observe the same adventure may have upon others, for this last we can never know, shut as we are each of us "into our persons as into a lasting prison," to quote Anatole France. But this thought is in effect an abandonment of the position criticism has occupied from the beginning, and is one not at all unfamiliar to a large number of critical writers today.

There is something almost tragic in the manner in which these thinkers surrender the lines so long occupied by their predecessors. It is a little like being ejected by a mortgage from one's family home. But they make "the grand refusal" with a dramatic gesture. "Æsthetics is founded upon nothing solid. It is a castle in the air. Men have tried to prop it on ethics. But there is no ethics." Though Anatole France is somewhat melancholy, Spingarn, who is a disciple of Croce, even rejoices in this novelty of homelessness. "To say that poetry is moral or immoral is as meaningless as to say that an equilateral triangle is moral and an isosceles triangle immoral." One would have thought that all triangles were moral, so long as they were triangles and obeyed the laws of triangles. But Spingarn is a humorist and here shows his love of paradox. "We have done with all moral judgments of literature." With this we have the judgment of non-suit, and the case of criticism is dismissed. It is the theory of "pure poetry" or "art for art's sake." But before we can accept the theory, in spite of its alluring simplicity, it will be necessary to subject it to a careful examination. For though it may deny moral values to art and poetry, it cannot dispense with some sort of value or there would be no motive for reading, nor one for experiencing any art.

Whatever may be the theory of criticism we accept, its object is always, in one way or another, destined to return to the question of value. The naïve, careless reader discovers some value in his pastime, though he may be utterly unable to define it. The

more careful or thoughtful reader merely takes more cognizance of the nature of this compensation, and as a result demands the variety of reading that will most adequately give the desired returns.

The critic is only a better qualified reader. But he reads also with a slight difference. The critic is also a third in a party of three, as Faguet has it, "the author, the reader, and the critic is the mediator." He goes about his reading with the consciousness that there are two others to whom he owes a debt; the author, on the one hand, who desires that the experience of the book or the poem and its value be adequately reëxperienced; and the reader, on the other, who may not be able without some aid to enjoy the full value of the reading experience. How much, for example, have our readings of Shakespeare's tragedies, or of Dante's *Divine Comedy*—mighty experiences, both—been aided by the light that criticism has thrown upon them—and hindered, as well, if the critics are incompetent? In this sense, then, the critic may be called the interpreter of the value of reading. He is able to interpret only in so far as he is able to experience the poem or book. It is only in this power of discriminating between experiences and of assigning each its appropriate value that his unique power, if he has any, lies. It is with this thought in mind that Goethe describes the problem of creative criticism: "It asks, What did the author set out to do? Was his plan reasonable and sensible; and how far did he succeed in carrying it out?" In answering this the critic becomes something more than the reader—he becomes the judge. Criticism is more than interpretation or appreciation; it implies also the higher faculty of judgment; and judgment must be based upon some standards of value.

Chapter II

THE READER

MEANING AND UNDERSTANDING—READING AND EXPERIENCE—COMMUNICATION AND ART—SYMBOLS AND ART—DEFINITION OF READING—DIFFICULTIES IN READING—OBSCURITY—OBSCURITY DUE TO THE READER—REAL AND IMAGINARY EXPERIENCE—THE IMAGINATION.

It is a common complaint of teachers of literature that young people who have quite mastered the technique of reading and have a fair range of dictionary vocabulary seem utterly unable to "enter into the spirit" of what they are asked to read. How is it, they ask pertinently, that a boy or a girl of fourteen can get nothing out of Wordsworth's poem on the daffodils, when there is not a single word in it that is not easily accessible? Surely, so runs the argument, if the words are like the bricks that go to make a house, and each word, like each brick, has its place and meaning, and its meaning and relation are perfectly intelligible to the reader; surely, then, the sum of the bricks must equal the house, and the sum of the meanings of the words, be the meaning of the poem. The whole must be equal to its parts.

For this is our common explanation of the process of reading. Words of certain functions are built into sentences; and the sentence has the combined meaning of the constituent words. The sentences are built into paragraphs; and the paragraphs consolidate the meaning of the sentences. And so the process goes on until we have the completed structure, the theme, story, poem, or whatever it may be, which is equal to the added sum of all its parts. So we study words as though they were things, and sentences, paragraphs, and the like, as though they were composites

which in the last analysis go back to the words. We milk the words of their meaning into the small pails of the sentence, turn these into the paragraphs, and the paragraphs into the creamery cans of the completed composition. I confess I have stated the case a trifle crassly, and perhaps exaggerated the tendency; be the offense greater or less, nevertheless the attitude I have described is common. The reader should understand anything he reads, granted that he knows the meanings of the words—so we argue.

But in truth, we know, and our practice reveals that we know quite well, that frequently the argument is most unequivocably *not* true. Very frequently—nearly always—the whole is greater than its parts. The words are not the ultimate units. And if we do understand, it is because of something no dictionary can ever quite reveal. If, on the other hand, we do not understand, no dictionary will ever be able to do much to help us. Some of the details that will be necessary to make all this clear we shall have to postpone until later chapters. One or two we shall take up directly. To put the thing before us clearly, the whole question of reading is something more complex than learning the sound and meaning of the printed word and the manner in which it may enter into combinations with other sounds or printed signs on the page.

The act of reading is indeed a far more complicated process than merely the act of articulating[1] the sounds of which the words are symbols. For the sounds also are symbols which in a most intimate way are bound up with past experience. Rarely do we learn words and their meanings from the dictionary, and even when we do they do not become a part of our mental equipment until they have been used—that is, until they have acquired a life of their own; until they have become associated with the store of accumulated experience. For example, the symbols for all lights and colors can mean nothing to a person who has been blind from birth; just as a word connoting sound must ever remain an

[1] Even if one reads to oneself one is in reality unconsciously, perhaps, preparing the muscles of the throat for the articulation—imaginal articulation and sound.

empty symbol to one who has never heard. In this sense words are like the checks we present at the bank for payment. They signify that there is something stored up somewhere which on the presentation of the symbol can be turned into cash. The thing that has been stored up is experience which has been associated with past use of the symbol, and which is vividly available when the words are used. In this way a person carries the dictionary, to which he refers the words he hears, in his memory. And without a corresponding experience the words are without much value. But the process of cashing in on the "savings" of past experience, or, if we use the other figure, of consulting the dictionary of the memory, is generally one that by habit becomes almost automatic and unconscious. The paying teller's window is always open, and he pays immediately, unless some strange or unfamiliar check is presented. Then there is the well-known delay, the mental search and momentary perplexity; or, if there is no experience stored against that particular symbol, a refusal to pay, and the reading is suddenly arrested.

Naturally each word is not a separate symbol, for frequently it will take several related words to complete the stimulus that will call up the desired reaction. For example, read each word quite separately:

> Life / like / a / dome / of / many / colored / glass,
> Stains / the / white / radiance / of / eternity

and the lines mean little. But, if we read:

> Life, / like a dome of many-colored glass, /
> Stains / the white radiance of infinity /

the whole is vibrant with poetic significance. Yet, further, one into whose fund of experience the vague emotion and magic reverberation of infinitude has never come, will never by any spell be able to read these lines. But we anticipate.

It is precisely because we thus store up past experience in our memories, which is available to instant call, that we are able to communicate with each other. But communication would also

be impossible if we did not have a large fund of available experience in common. Man is a sociable animal, and in no way has he so obviously shown his inherent social life as by the fact that he has developed language. Homer's Cyclops could never have had more than the most primitive rudiments of speech. For, "these have neither gatherings for council nor oracles of law, but they dwell in hollow caves on the crests of the high hills, and each one utters the law to his children and his wives, and they reck not one of another."

It is only by means of our power of communication that we share each other's lives; and in return, by our participating thus in the larger life of the community, we improve our powers of communication. In this way, in spite of the plausible theories of some, the art of literature is not the eccentric experience of the individual poet or thinker—or a solitary—but far rather, in the most intimate way, the finest flower of this large gregariousness of humanity. It may also be true, we shall find, that the finer and nobler the store of experience the poet can draw upon out of the life of the community, the more value there will be in his poetry. But this, again, is to anticipate.

In essence, the "art" of literature differs only very slightly from any of the other so-called "fine arts." They are all a means for the communication of experience. The poet, painter, sculptor, or musician, has by means of some stimulus—it makes no essential difference whether the stimulus be external or internal—achieved a complete and significant experience. This, as we shall see in the next chapter, is a purely mental phenomenon, and one that everyone may have in a more or less satisfactory form. It is also a trait that the artist shares with the rest of humanity, that he remains unsatisfied until he has "told it" to others. The result is the poem, the story, the statue, the painting, or the symphony. These differ only as each artist uses a different mode or means of communication.[1]

[1] There is, of course, some difference in the variety of experience most appropriate to each "art." The boundaries of the arts, however, are never precisely fixed. A sonata, for example, cannot tell a very intelligible story, but it can do something not altogether foreign to a lyric sequence of poetry. But this subject is a famous battle-ground. See Lessing's *Laocoön*, and Irving Babbitt's *New Laocoön*.

The poet, as the man of letters, uses the symbol of sounds, as they are articulated into words and phrases. He uses a great deal more—rhythm, pitch, meter, rhyme—which even the most prosaic may catch himself using, especially when roused. These sound and rhythm symbols, by an invention that infinitely aided human progress, we have learned to symbolize further by written signs. Finally, the words and phrases are spoken or written—in either case the effect is the same—into the pattern that we call the poem or story. The musician, like the poet, also uses sound symbols, the musical notes and pitch and duration, which he combines into a musical pattern to express his experience. The painter uses lines and masses of color; the sculptor, lines and volumes. To most of us, who are often careless in our thinking, the resultant poem, or symphony, or landscape, or statue is the work of art. But in reality the work of art has in it also the inner experience, that of the poet as well as that of the reader. The printed words, or the painted canvas, are only the objective symbols of this inner and significant reality.

It might be well for the sake of perfect clearness to take an illustration. The original experience that gave Wordsworth the hint for the theme of his poem is not difficult to reconstruct after a reading. He has left for us the symbols of the experience in the imagery and rhythm.

I wander'd lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the Milky Way,
They stretched in never-ending line
Along the margin of a bay:
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced, but they
Outdid the sparkling waves in glee:
A poet could not but be gay,
In such a jocund company:
I gazed—and gazed—but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

But a painter similarly using his set of symbols, space in two dimensions, on a canvas, and lines and masses of color, could have left us his experience expressed in a landscape. Were he a good landscape painter, a Claude Monet, for example, we would have something quite as valuable in its way as Wordsworth's lyric. I am afraid a sculptor would find the theme impossible, for his symbols, the lines and volumes of marble or bronze, are too obvious and unyielding. But a musician could similarly give us a lyric movement that would, certainly more vaguely but none the less potently, express the joy and consolation of the inner experience.[1]

Now our carelessness in thinking and in the use of language is nowhere more apparent than when we call the printed poem only, or the painted canvas, or the expressed music, the work of art. The thing of significance rather is the experience that the poet, or the painter, had in the first place, and which by virtue of the symbol, the notes or the words or the paint, he is able to call up in the minds of others. The symbol becomes an interpreter, as it were, between the poet and the reader, so that we now, a hundred and more years after Wordsworth, can have an experience not unlike his. Only there is this difference. The original stimulus that stirred the poet's mind into activity for us is now

[1] A similar feat has more than once been accomplished; for example, Meredith's lyric on the lark, Breton's painting, and Leschetizky's musical cadences.

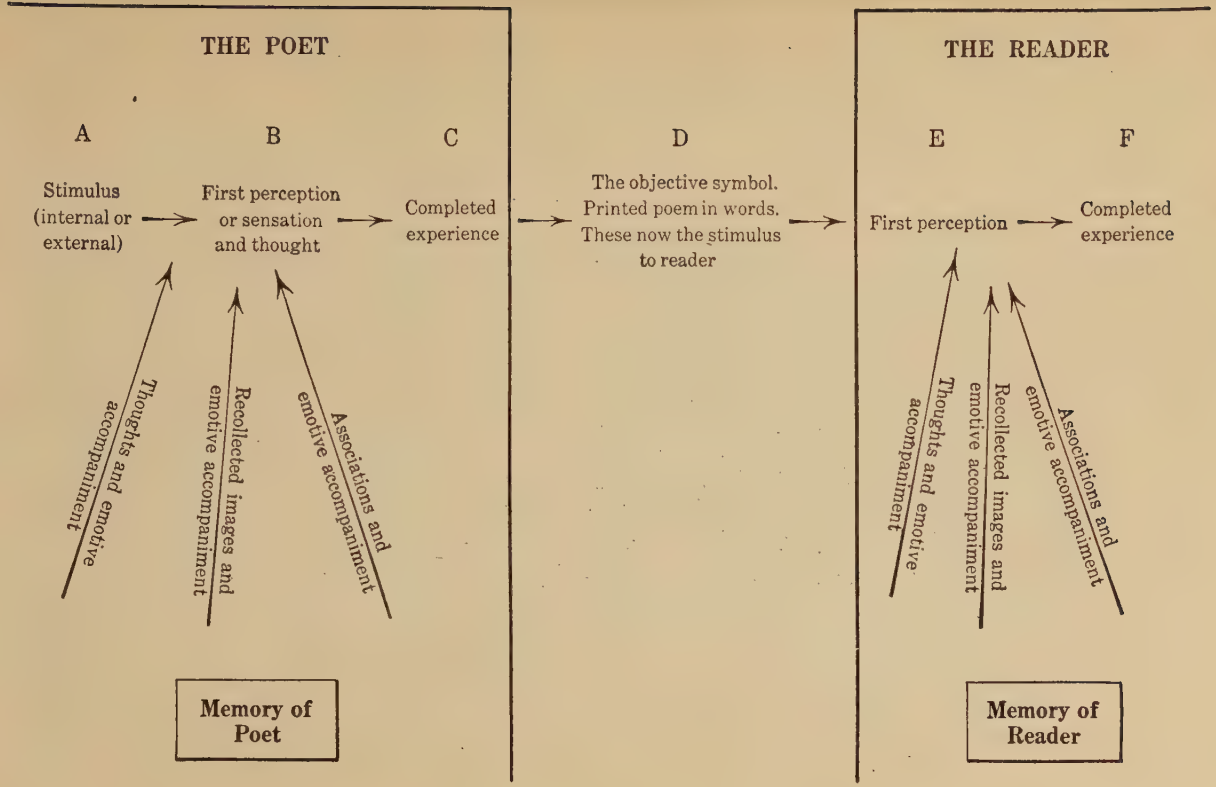
entirely lost. In its place he has left us the communicated symbol, which in turn becomes, in its words, musical phrase, imagery, rhythm, rhyme, a new stimulus, provoking our minds into controlled activity which, like his, completes the experience, the work of art. This is what the German poet, Hebbel, means when he says, "Whoever absorbs a work of art into himself goes through the same process as the artist who produced it—only he reverses the process and increases its speed."

It may be of some help to a reader to make a rough diagram of the process of an experience of the kind described, from the moment when the stimulus first comes to the poet to the completed final response of the reader.[1]

It should be fairly obvious now that what the reader does is something quite different from adding up the meaning of the words and getting the meaning of this or any other poem. In one way this poem has very little meaning. And to one who can read no farther than its bare dictionary ideas, it must remain ever a humiliating failure. But if one can call up the emotional associations, the poem becomes rich in significance—as it was to the poet.

It is possible now to answer one question raised at the beginning of this chapter. The ability to read the poem and to grasp its significance lies in the reader's past experience which by the stimulus of the printed words is called instantly into present use. The vivid words and phrases, the accompanying musical rhythms, are the stimuli which set up reverberations in available past experience, with their associated ideas, impulses, and emotions; and these unite into a new pattern which gives novelty and yet universality to the new experience: novelty, for we should be offended by a stale and unprofitable repetition of the common and the old; universality, otherwise the experience would not be a favorite with many. And the response to this poem is not difficult, for it is a favorite with the large crop of writers and readers of spring poetry. But it is perhaps in the very commonness and easy accept-

[1] This subject of the symbolisms of literary art is taken up in fuller detail in the chapters on communication, Chapters IV and V.


THE POET
A
B
C
Stimulus (internal or external)
First perception or sensation and thought
Completed experience
Thoughts and emotive accompaniment
Recollected images and emotive accompaniment
Associations and emotive accompaniment
Memory of Poet
D
The objective symbol. Printed poem in words. These now the stimulus to reader
THE READER
E
F
First perception
Completed experience
Thoughts and emotive accompaniment
Recollected images and emotive accompaniment
Associations and emotive accompaniment
Memory of Reader

ance of this attitude that the danger of a poem on this or a similar theme lies. It may so easily become trite, and thus offend one whose taste is alert to detect the first signs of second-hand or spurious poetry. Indeed, there are some who are so cautious lest they give their hearts to the commonplace that they fail even to see the genuineness in this lyric by Wordsworth.[1]

But there is another and larger danger for one who is attempting to reconstruct an experience by reading; and the fault may lie with the author or the interpreter of his symbol. The writer may not have had a complete experience, or he may have communicated it in an obscure manner. On the other hand the reader's experience may not be rich enough to give him a background adequate for a satisfactory response. In either case the result will be, on the reader's part, a painful sense of bafflement.

Both of these difficulties may be described by the term obscurity. There is, of course, and not as infrequently as perhaps might be wished, an obscurity due to the writer. He may deliberately adopt a type of symbolism—we call it a style—that is provokingly difficult, in order, as a French critic puts it, to frighten off the careless or less well-equipped reader. He uses his symbols in a perverse manner, with a willful ingeniousness, perhaps a conscious sophistication, that is caviar to the "general." At times such work may seem like the ancient oracles, purposely ambiguous. In the words of Faguet, "an obscure passage is a cloudy mirror in which each one may see the features he imagines his to be."

Of such, perhaps, to some less well-equipped reader is this song by John Donne:

> Goe, and catche a falling starre,
> Get with child a mandrake roote,
> Tell me, where all past yeares are,
> Or who cleft the Devel's foot,
> Teach me to hear Mermaides singing,

[1] The reader will find this last thought treated at more adequate length in Chapter VIII. It will be recalled that it was Coleridge, the personal friend and associate of Wordsworth, who with delicate taste invited attention to this weakness in the poem just studied.

Or to keep off envies stinging,
And finde
What winde
Serves to advance an honest minde.

If thou beest borne to strange sights,
Things invisible to see,
Ride ten thousand daies and nights,
Till age snow white haires on thee,
Thou, when thou return'st, wilt tell mee
All strange wonders that befell thee,
And sweare
No where
Lives a woman true, and faire.

If thou findst one, let me know,
Such a pilgrimage were sweet;
Yet doe not, I would not goe,
Though at next doore wee might meet.
Though shee were true, when you met her,
And last, till you write your letter,
Yet shee
Will bee
False, ere I come, to two, or three.

Of the same kind are many of the things said by some to be the best in the poetry of Robert Browning. Such obscurity is the delight of the learned poets whom Dr. Johnson grouped together under the misleading term metaphysical. But in such cases one can usually feel assured that the effort spent in deciphering the text, and then reconstructing the experience, will make its ultimate possession the more valuable. At the lowest, there is always the value of the mental effort, even though the pleasure of conquest be not essentially different from that which comes from solving a mathematical problem. At the highest is the reward of much of the greatest poetry.

There are times also when the obscurity is due to large liberties the writer takes with his symbols. It is the old story of the mis-

understanding every innovator has had to live down or conquer. No one today has any difficulty in understanding a Turner, or a Monet landscape, though there is still not a little confusion of ideas about Cézanne. And it is easy now to explain what lies at the heart of this particular difficulty. All of these artists introduced a new vocabulary, as it were, in trying to communicate their experience; they insisted on using lines and colors in a manner quite different from the accepted. The result was what might have been expected. People had learned how to "read" paintings in the old manner, and had expected to see certain conventional effects. When suddenly they were asked to see in an entirely new way, and to make an entirely new approach to values, they were at first unprepared, and in disappointment turned on the artists and called them names. The same thing has repeatedly happened in music. One should expect it also in the world of letters.

Naturally there is no "eternal fixity" about the symbols to be used in any art. They are always, like our words and rules of grammar, things which are accepted as symbols only so long as there is general agreement about their use. From their use comes that enjoyment Aristotle describes in the *Poetics* as coming from the recognition of the author's purpose. But when the agreement changes, the symbols must likewise change. Indeed, to a certain extent every great artist changes the symbols slightly to suit his particular variety of experience.

But there have always been poets and writers who have strained after novelty by using verbal symbols in an unaccepted manner, and their writing in consequence will always seem obscure to the uninitiated. Persons who are acquainted with the history of literature will recall without difficulty such special cults, as euphuism in England and preciosity in France. By analogy with them, there ought to be no great surprise at our futurist and imagist poets today. They are only trying to do something they regard as new and valuable in poetry and rhythmic prose. They undertake it at their own peril, as do all innovators. For always

at the beginning there will be the fierce opposition of all who do not understand, and resent radical liberties. If they succeed, their radicalism will be forgotten and their practice will become the practice of all, and they are understood. Was it not Ibsen who spoke of the minorities of today as being the majorities of tomorrow? If they fail, their tragedy will be ignored, for no one will have understood what they gave their lives to express. The history of literature is strewn with the unmarked and unremembered graves of those who have perished in lost causes.

Hence, one need not be resentful or humiliated because he cannot read a poem like the following by Miss Sitwell. For, though the experience may have meant much to the poet, it is in a language most people have not yet learned.

By white wool houses thick with sleep
Wherein pig-snouted small winds creep,

With our white muslin faces clean,
We slip to see what can be seen.

Those rustling corn-sheaves the gold stars
Drop grain between the window-bars

Among dark leaves all velvety—
(So seem the shadows). And we see

Crazed Martha tie up her brown hair
With the moon's blue ribbons, stare

At candles that are lit in vain—
They cannot penetrate her brain:

Their tinsel jargon seems to be
Incomprehensibility

To Martha's mind, though every word
Of hers they echo, like that bird

Of brilliant plumage, whose words please
The Indians by their bright-plumed seas.

The Fair's tunes bloom like myosotis
Smooth-perfumed stephanotis;

We children come with twisted curls
Like golden corn-sheaves or fat pearls,

Like ondines in blue muslin dance
Around her; never once a glance

She gives us: "Can my love be true?
He promised he would bring me blue

Ribbons to tie up my brown hair.
He promised me both smooth and fair

That he would dive through brightest plumes
Of Indian seas for pearls, where glooms

The moon's blue ray; in her sleeping-chamber
Find me Thetis' fan of amber."

. . . . . .

The candles preen and sleek their feathers. . . .
"Pretty lady!" "Sweet June weathers."

But silence now lies all around
Poor Martha, since her love is drowned.

Whether this be good poetry or poor is just now beside the mark. The point I would insist upon is merely this, that in view of the experience of any average reader, and his use of language symbols, this is deliberately obscure poetry. It is not alone the images which somehow do not quite register—"pig-snouted winds

creep," "candles preen and sleek their feathers"—nor the strange jargon in which the humble forget-me-not and the jasmine flaunt themselves; rather it is a conscious effort on the part of the writer to use a new technique that leaves even a careful reader bewildered. It is not a new art, but a desire to get well-known effects by using words in hopelessly unfamiliar groupings. One gets from it an experience, to be sure; but as there is no possible agreement about the symbols, no two persons can get even a remote approximation of the same experience, and one can only speculate about the original experience of the author.

But there is yet a further difficulty in reading which is all due to the limitations of the reader himself. It would be cruel and vain to expect a child whose mathematics had gone no farther than simple algebra to understand the reasoning of the integral calculus. It is idle to expect one who has spent his whole life in quiet seclusion to accommodate himself quickly and easily to the environment of a large foreign city. It is equally futile to expect a person with a restricted experience or imagination to get much out of a book or poem that requires a rich and varied background of life. This does not mean that the reader carries away from the reading only what he brings; though it is nearly true that "we carry with us the wonders we seek without us; there is all Africa and her prodigies in us." We do carry the details of the picture; the startling revelation of the poet is that they can be thus miraculously blended into an undreamed-of pattern.

It was Virgil who in the century of Christ's birth was able to bring together all the aspirations and disillusionments—the sense of Roman pride and of Roman law and order, and yet also of the futility and insignificance of the human individual; the affirmations of hope and the denial of religion; the enthusiasm of glorious national accomplishment and the bitterness of private tragedy—that made up the complex experience of each thinking Roman, and gave to them all an abiding place and a name in the *Æneid*. Hence a person who would read Virgil today must live again, or be imaginatively able to live again, that age of doubt

and conviction, before he can understand the poem. Without that power there can be no echo to the author's,

Sunt lacrimæ rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt,[1]

or

Desine fata deum flecti sperare precando.[2]

These things are the tragedy of ancient Rome; and we wonder why children in high school, and sometimes immature teachers of Latin, can never think of Virgil except in terms of syntax!

Perhaps of all great poets the mediæval Dante is the hardest to contemplate justly, Dante with forehead *"livide et vert,"* bowed with the crushing task of maintaining divine justice in a world of injustice. For most readers it is easier, and more obvious, to make with him the journey to Hell—*"facilis descensus in Averno."* And with the children of Ravenna, most of us exclaim—*"Voilà, voilà celui qui revint de l'enfer."*[3] Lo, the man who returns from Hell. But to Dante himself the journey through Hell was slow and painful—not the pilgrimage first allotted to man, but the place where the slowly dehumanized man at last stood forth naked and revealed. It is only to Milton's and Virgil's hell that the passage is easy for the poet. For them the task was the ascent to Heaven.

Sed revocare gradum superasque evadere ad auras,
Hoc opus, hic labor est.[4]

But for the Florentine it was the upper ascent through Purgatory and the glorious flight through the stars to God's throne, that was the easy and natural path for the human soul. Dante had gazed with unflinching eyes upon the mystery of the universe and upon its hosts, until in a supernal splendor he had caught the secret of Divinity itself. This is the ideal of the contemplative Middle Ages, to which the Blessed Vision was an ever-present splendor. And it is this that reveals the true Dante, an experience

[1] There are tears for mortality, and the fate of man touches the heart.
[2] Cease to hope by prayer to sway the destiny of Heaven.
[3] From Auguste Barbier, *Dante.*
[4] But, to retrace our steps, and to mount to the upper air, this is the toil, this the struggle.

that only an imagination that can hold converse with Glory, as well as with Damnation, can compass. Dante is no reading for an easy irrelevant reader.

Dante knows his own difficulty, and it is in no mere spirit of conscious self-approval that he warns his readers:

> O ye, who in a trifle of a bark,
> Eager to listen, have been following
> Behind my ship that singing makes its way,
> Turn back to look again upon your shores;
> Put you not out to sea; lest it befall
> That, losing me, ye should remain astray.[1]

It is easier to lose one's way in heaven than in hell, for of those who entered those lower regions he demanded only the abandonment of hope. But here, where God dwells, man must learn to drink joy in its ineffable splendor; an experience almost impossible now, for since the days of the mystics of the Middle Ages we have forgotten the cult of joy.

But it is not only that many have difficulty in understanding the longer poems of the great like Virgil or Dante, who have crystallized, as it were, an age's mental struggle into a single long poem. There are also many lesser poets—like Blake, for example—whose attitude is so remote from what may be lampooned as the attitude of "common sense," that they require difficult mental adjustments before they can be understood. Even one of his more obvious poems, *Tiger, Tiger,* for example, leaves some fairly competent readers perplexed and questioning.

The same fact is discovered easily with dramatists and novelists. Dickens leaves many casual readers today cold, Dickens who seventy years ago kept everyone thrilled with expectancy for the next installment of his novels. But the background of his stories is so highly specialized, his attitude so completely that of his own age, that it is difficult for some now to place themselves imaginatively at his side and share his interests. His rival, Thackeray, however, seems as easy today as he was in his own time. It is a

[1] *Paradise,* II, translated by Johnson. Reprinted by permission of the Yale University Press.

curious retribution which time exacts; Dickens popular in his own time with people of all sorts and conditions, and Thackeray only for the few. And now almost the reverse, Dickens quite localized in his interest, and Thackeray found to be almost easy to read. The same fate has overtaken the great English dramatist Ben Jonson. In his time he was the outstanding rival of Shakespeare, and at times seems to speak almost patronizingly of his less-learned friend. Today how few there are who can read Ben Jonson. It is not that his art or his value has been in any way lessened; but his intimate connection with the life of his time, his "localization," as it were, requires of his reader the background of Elizabethan or Jacobean London, which most readers find difficult to imagine.

But this experience which the reader must bring before he can read, this "Africa and her prodigies," which Sir Thomas Browne says we carry in us, must this be real experience or imaginary? For example, must a person have suffered some actual loss before he can adequately experience tragedy in literature? As I write it, the question seems absurd, but nevertheless it has been put and has led to some serious misunderstandings. Before it is answered, however, we can go one step farther, and ask how far the poet's experience needs to be founded on fact.

There are those who have been convinced that before he can write of life the poet must know the world, that, like Faust, he must in actual experience have touched the heights and the depths. Its ugliness can be revealed, so it is argued, only if one has seen with his own eyes the grotesque paradoxes of the *Walpurgisnacht;* the tragedy of innocent love violated can be learned only if one has known a Margaret. It is this school of critics that makes much of the significance of each fact in a poet's life, seeking in his outward acts and in the influence of external fact for the inspiration of the great moments of his poetry. The older Goethe lent not a little credence to the value of such labor, when he wrote his *Dichtung und Wahrheit aus meinem Leben.* And the literal interpretation would seem to be that out of the external

Wahrheit, truth, came the stimulus for the wealth of *Dichtung,* poetry.

But the significant thing for both the poet and the poet's reader is not the nature of the external fact, but the nature of the mental and imaginative response. For the person who would read the effect in the cause, a poet's work in his external life, there will appear a strange and utterly unaccountable discrepancy between the vulgar and utterly commonplace vagaries of the young Rousseau, and the imaginative world he creates for us in the *Confessions.* Likewise, Goethe in his novel, the *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre,* in a manner half-allegorical, half-biographical, leads us through the mazes of a poet's education for a creative life, and shows us in the main only vulgar and commonplace incidents. There are no moving accidents in either narrative, no shocking or terrifying tragedies; merely routine that might have and probably did come into the lives of thousands of individuals who remained ever vulgar and commonplace.

There is something within the poet's mind—we can call it the imagination—which by its own alchemy transmutes the ordinary fact of the commonplace into the tissue of romance or tragedy. The most painful research into the facts of Shakespeare's life reveals no secret of *Hamlet* or *Lear;* so arid are the details so far uncovered, that there are those who are convinced that Shakespeare the actor and land-buyer could never have been Shakespeare the poet, and so have looked for a worthier father of the poetic offspring. The external fact may be the stimulus, but it is the mind that responds, and in its own way. The impulses and emotions that are evoked, the thoughts that are aroused, the complex pattern that the mental experience takes, these are the things of significance. These are the poet's experience.

We shall inquire more closely later, in what respects the poet differs from the ordinary individual. But we can see clearly that, at least so far as external circumstances go, his life may appear to the outsider utterly commonplace. It is the same with the reader. The important thing is not that he shall have lived in fact through tragedies like *Hamlet* or *Œdipus,* but that he shall

have the imagination ready, out of the stimulus of the reading, to reconstruct the tragedy. The actual background of the reader's life may be as drab as drab and yet, for all that, he may be an ideal reader. The question touches only his inner experience—what are his powers of response; has he an imagination? For without an imagination sufficient to live the pity and terror of tragedy, he can never read *Lear*.[1]

But it is nevertheless true that, in so far as no two persons can have identical past experience or can respond exactly in the same way to the same stimulus, no two readers can have quite the same experience from the same reading. It is a commonplace to say that there is no accounting for tastes, *chacun à son goût, de gustibus non sit disputandum*. And it is this well-known fact that led Anatole France, as we have seen, to propose that there can be no standards in literature, for the reading experience is a peculiar and most intricate thing, as intimate as love-making.

We shall discuss the question of standards in taste later. But we can, I suspect, without disappointment accept the other limitation of the human equation in all reading. Indeed, one of the chiefest charms of human society lies in this essential necessity of variety in the species. When our reformers in psychology and sociology, as well as in education, have got through with their self-imposed task of attempting to raise or reduce—it makes little difference which—all of us to the same mental level, there will yet remain, we hope, enough variety to give us at least a trifle of zest for the adventure of living, and also for the adventure of reading poetry and literature, as well as of creating it.

There is no need of being depressed over the fact, which ought to be recognized, that Shakespeare's well-known sonnet, "That time of year thou mayest in me behold," will, like a perfect landscape, be seen from slightly different points of view by readers with slightly different backgrounds. One thing I believe we can accept as true, that, by the more competent readers, gradually through the exercise of reading, as the powers of imagination are

[1] An interesting comment on all this may be found in the lives of the Brontë sisters.

developed, there is acquired a larger and larger fund of common experience, which in time brings a larger and larger correspondence into the reading experiences. And this common denominator we may discover to be the general tradition of Taste.[1]

But we have seen enough, I trust, to recognize that the process of reading is not so different from the process of experiencing any other art. And the purpose of Art has nowhere been more simply, and perhaps adequately for the present, set forth than by Tolstoy:

> If only the spectators or auditors are infected by the feelings which the author has felt, it is art. . . .
>
> To evoke in oneself a feeling one has once experienced, and having evoked it in oneself, then, by means of movements, lines, colors, sounds, or forms expressed in words, so to transmit that feeling that others may experience the same feeling—this is the activity of art. . . .
>
> Art is a human activity, consisting in this, that one man consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that other people are infected by these feelings, and also experience them.[2]

In the process of reconstructing an experience, when "infected" by the experience of the writer, each reader becomes himself a creator, and reading is in effect a work of literary creation. It is true also, as Croce has written, that "each of us has in him a little of the poet." In the case of an adequate reader this "little" may become "much." We cannot better close this chapter than by quoting the words of a modern poet: "The words of life can come only out of life—but their return can only be unto life. One must have lived to have written, but one must have lived no less to have read." [3]

[1] This term will be more adequately discussed below; see Chapter VII.

[2] We have already had occasion to prefer the word experience to the word feelings, as used here carelessly by Tolstoy, for it includes many and varied elements. See the next chapter. It is noted, I hope, that in this definition Tolstoy does not yet qualify the art as being good or bad. There is one further remark I should like to make. This definition of art may, and probably will have to be slightly modified, to be made a little more accurate. See the last chapter.

[3] William Ellery Leonard.

Chapter III

THE QUESTION OF FORM

THE FORMLESS—ITS EFFECT ON THE MIND—THE EXPERIENCE OF READING —SOUND IMAGES—FREE IMAGES—IMPULSES—THE ATTITUDE—MEANING OF THE LACK OF FORM—THE THOUGHT IN FORM—TRANSLATION OF POETRY DIFFICULT—THE EMOTION IN POETRY—MENTAL BOMBAST—LITERARY AND "REAL" EXPERIENCE—LITERARY EXPERIENCE AND FORM—THE POET—THE POETIC IMAGINATION—THE POETIC AND THE UNPOETIC MIND.

The Poet

Milton in his descriptions is nowhere perhaps more satisfyingly vivid than in the picture of the sixth day of the creation:

> The grassy clods now calv'd; now half appear'd
> The tawny lion, pawing to get free
> His hinder parts, then springs as broke from bonds,
> And rampant shakes his brinded mane; the ounce,
> The libbard, and the tiger, as the mole
> Rising, the crumbl'd earth above them threw
> In hillocks; the swift stag from under ground
> Bore up his branching head; scarce from his mould
> Behemoth biggest born of earth upheav'd
> His vastness; fleec't the flocks and bleating rose
> As plants; ambiguous between sea and land
> The river horse and scaly crocodile.

Here is a scene that a sculptor like Rodin might well envy—a picture of arrested activity. The thing leaves the mind of the reader in suspense and longing, as it were, to free the lion and the

stag from the earth that yet fetters them. With the vigorous but only half-created animal, the mind struggles to wrench itself from the clod. The picture, or the story, of the creation is held at a dramatic moment, and the reader is left with the insistent mental demand to complete and give form to the poet's imagination.

This variety of purposeful *formlessness* must be carefully distinguished from the purposeful vagueness of a description like this:

> The other shape,
> If shape it might be call'd that shape had none
> Distinguishable in member, joint, or limb,
> Or substance might be call'd that shadow seem'd,
> For each seem'd either; black it stood as night,
> Fierce as ten furies, terrible as Hell,
> And shook a dreadful dart; what seem'd his head
> The likeness of a kingly crown had on.

Like Milton's description of Death is Virgil's famous but briefer one of the Cyclops: *"Monstrum, horrendum, informe, ingens, cui lumen ademptum."*[1] The very vagueness of these two pictures, their terrifying mystery, is their chief value. The formlessness in the first passage, on the other hand, is not due to vagueness, but to the fact that the action is incomplete, and its sign is the accompanying mental unrest.

The same dissatisfaction is felt as one gazes at an unfinished house, or a room with its furniture disordered, or a mutilated statue, or listens to an unaccountable noise, or to a strain of a forgotten melody, or waits for a fish to rise again to a fly. It was the same feeling of an experience left ominously incomplete that caused Robinson Crusoe the strange alarm when he discovered the footprint on the shore of his desert island. Such varied stimuli rouse mental activity; but as they are inadequate, the mind is unable to find the clue to the experiences, the activity remains arrested, and the mind unable to rest. The dissatisfaction may in some cases even be painful, like that of the fabled Tantalus,

[1] "A monster, horrid, shapeless, huge, with sightless eye."

doomed through eternity to smell the savor of rich food and to feel the coolness of water, and yet unable to satisfy his appetite.

It is precisely for this reason that ruins, old castles and abandoned cities are romantically thrilling. I doubt if a baronial castle in the good old days was ever so charged with poetic potency as its now forlorn relict, with its ivy-clad walls and crumbling donjon; I doubt if it was as interesting, or even as dramatic as a modern bank building. It was certainly less imposing and less valuable. But the unsatisfied mind, seeing these tooth marks of time, rambles romantically trying to fill out the broken spaces and to restore them to life. There is nothing specifically beautiful in a broken tower or a shattered arch; indeed, to a practical person, with no romantic imagination, they are grotesque or even ugly. They acquire value only because they are not what they were, because they are now incomplete; and this incompleteness arrests the mind with a thrill of awakened curiosity. The mind, thus, has an instinctive habit of seeking to complete an aroused activity and to give it, as we say, "form."

With this brief description in mind of what "form" implies, it is possible, I believe, to describe what goes on in the mind during the process of a reading experience. The whole is probably an extremely complex affair, but we can disentangle several important clues which will serve to give a definition. Later it will be possible and perhaps interesting to compare literary form with the other forms of experience which come more directly. It must be understood at the outset that the process is not in reality a simple chronological sequence, though for convenience we may separate it into a number of distinct stages.[1] It will be simpler at the outset to limit the discussion to the reading of poetry.

We may, for example, take the well-known quatrain in Shakespeare's sonnet:

> That time of year thou may'st in me behold
> When yellow leaves, or none, or few do hang

[1] The reader is referred to Richards' *Principles of Criticism*, where this topic is more fully treated. I wish here to acknowledge my debt to his clear elucidation of this complex subject.

Upon those boughs which shake against the cold—
Bare ruin'd choirs where late the sweet birds sang.

We can discard the first step, the sight and recognition of the printed symbols, the letters and words. This, to one who knows English and reads fluently, is not a conscious process, and one is rarely aware of the complicated adjustments the mind must make in "reading" the symbols. For unless there be some unusual difficulty in the type or in the sentence structure or the text, or there be some unfamiliar words, a passage like this is read not word by word, much less letter by letter, but by larger groups; the eye traveling ahead, while the mind is busy with the second step in the process of reading.

Whether one is aware of it or not, nearly everyone in reading, and especially in reading poetry, has auditory and articulatory images of the words read. Naturally persons differ markedly in the vividness of these images; to some the sound of the words and their rhythms, even when they are reading to themselves, is a conscious and pleasing experience; to others there is scarcely any suggestion of their melody. In the same way the articulatory image, the imaginal pronunciation of the words, will differ for people. In the reading to oneself in a foreign language the process noticeably rises into consciousness. But upon this double process, that of imaginal pronunciation and hearing of the words, will depend the sensing of their rhythmic pattern, and the "feeling" of their melody; all those important effects, which are referred to when one speaks of the music of poetry or prose, will depend upon the successful completion of this step. In plain prose, on the other hand, where the rhythms are more simple, one is rarely conscious of much more than the mere presence of the natural word groupings, and the mind proceeds to the next steps.

Most readers of Shakespeare's sonnets will remember that one of the large secrets of the charm of this passage, and of others like it, is due to the free images called up by the felicitous choice of phrases. *"Yellow leaves . . . hang upon those boughs . . . shake against the cold . . . bare ruined choirs . . . where late the*

sweet birds sang." There will be occasion, in the next two chapters, to discuss in detail the value of imagery. But here it must be noted that these are not all visible images, but auditory and sensory as well. In a poem like this, rich in imagery, all of the senses may thus be roused into imaginal activity, and the experience thus indefinitely enriched.

In passing, it may here be noted that not all persons, nor indeed any two persons, will or can have the same free images. One may wonder what ruined old church Shakespeare had in mind when he wrote of the "bare ruined choirs." To a person who is unacquainted with mediæval Gothic architecture the image will always be vague. For all this imagery will depend most intimately upon the variety of associations that can be summoned freely from past experience. There are cases also, instantly recognizable, where the reader calls up an image that is palpably wrong, but yet the reading may in no perceptible way be made less pleasurable. For example, in the famous apostrophe to sleep in *Macbeth,* "Sleep that knits up the ravelled *sleave* of care," nine readers out of ten, though they may know perfectly the meaning of the word "sleave," will by association with the better-known "sleeve" create an image that ever needs to be consciously erased, and the corrected, and hence blurred, image substituted.

Furthermore, readers differ in the variety of free imagery that is thus available for the reading of poetry. In consequence, it is gratuitous to expect visible, or auditory, or sensory images from all readers. To one who cannot see there may, and probably will be certain compensations; he may hear or feel more vividly in consequence. For the imaginal activity of the senses corresponds more or less in its power to the real. We are differently endowed; and poor eyesight or partial deafness often has its compensation in a sharpened other sense. On the other hand, it may safely be asserted that to the reader who lacks the power, or who has never trained his power, to sense the imagery of a poem, one of the chief secrets of the charm of poetry has never been revealed. That the power can also, by failure to call upon it, be atrophied there is abundant evidence; that it can be discovered and trained in a

person who has been unconscious of it, there also seems to be evidence; but to do so will mean something almost revolutionary in our methods of teaching literature.

The next step in the process is somewhat difficult to describe, for it is impossible to say just what takes place in the mind during this phase of its activity. By all these preceding processes, and by others we shall describe later, there are aroused in the mind certain clearly defined or obscure "impulses." These might be called the first free response of the mind, and will depend upon the state of mind of the reader. This last fact may be clearly illustrated. Take, for example, the following quatrain from Fitzgerald's *Omar Khayyám:*

> A Book of Verses underneath the Bough,
> A Jug of Wine, a Loaf of Bread—and Thou
> Beside me singing in the Wilderness—
> Oh, Wilderness were Paradise enow!

Out of this one may obviously distinguish the impulses aroused by the familiar theme of wine, women, and song, only much more delicately and poetically stimulated. But to one who for one reason or another has put up the bars against these seductions, whose mind in consequence is not in a state to be able to respond to them, the impulses will not rise, and the poem will remain, not an experience, but only a rhythmic pattern of word sounds and the corresponding images, and a dash of unwelcome and irrelevant thought.

The impulses roused in a poem differ in no way from those we feel in so-called "real" experience. The sight or smell of food, if one is hungry, provokes the impulse to eat. The sound of dance music and the sight of dancers moves one at the least to beat time in one's head, if not to press the floor rhythmically with one's foot. The hearing of a tale of injustice, no less than the sight of unjust injury, rouses one to righteous anger. And past experience, all tradition, and our own education, store us with the appropriate impulse against the details of almost every available situation. An easy illustration will serve. The music of

the American national anthem rouses in most Americans the same impulses, connected in some way with the motive we call patriotism. But that there is no necessary connection between the mere juxtaposition of musical notes and phrases and the now resultant impulses, is obvious when we remember that before Francis Scott Key wrote the words, the air had been used for an old drinking song and as such, in those who knew it, produced a system of impulses quite paradoxical today.

In the case of the quatrain from Shakespeare, the impulses are not quite so easy to describe; yet one may, if one will analyze the experience of reading it, distinguish to a certain degree the shudder of cold, the loneliness of a late autumn forest, and the forlornness of an abandoned and ruined church. These might be called, except that the phrase is inexact, the "tone" or "color" of the poem, and give in no small part its emotive value.

The impulse, however, is a mental activity that does not carry on indefinitely. It wishes, indeed demands, the opportunity to translate itself into an appropriate action; else it remains unsatisfied, and the mind is unable to rest. For example, the impulse of hunger remains a mental as well as a physical craving until satisfied by food; the impulse of fear seeks satisfaction in the safety of flight; of anger, in the quick response of a blow or an explosive epithet. Nearly all of our expletives and profanity are an outlet for impulses seeking the readiest and safest satisfaction in action. In almost the same way laughter, the happy physical convulsion that radiates in a smile or bursts into a rude guffaw, is the physical recompense for a purely mental situation, a physical relief for a mental activity, a *quid pro quo.*

But man learned early that it is safer or far more satisfactory at times to curb or inhibit the physical response to the urgent impulse. It is not always possible or even desirable to translate anger into words or blows, or terror into flight. This fact becomes especially true with the impulses roused by poetry and song. If one will read Dryden's *Alexander's Feast,* one can see how the poet in imagination, through the suggestion of song, translates

the emperor at will into a half dozen quite paradoxical persons. Such must have been the power of early poetry, as we can know from the history of tribal singing and dancing. The appropriate actions for the aroused impulses were thus early drawn off harmlessly into symbolic action. An excellent illustration of this may be seen in the war dances or other ceremonial festivals of the American Indians. A similar one in the history of the Hebrews may be read in the fifth chapter of Judges, a poem in celebration of a great victory, which obviously was at one time sung with appropriate gesture and action. It is precisely in this way that the drama, tragedy, and comedy probably originated.

As culture advanced, "imaginal action" soon took the place of symbolic, and we have the experiences of the reader of poetry as we know poetry today. In the quiet of a commonplace library one can read the stirring lines of Tennyson's *Charge of the Light Brigade,* or Browning's *How They Brought the Good News,* and so far as any visible symptoms might indicate, one might as well be engaged in the most prosaic of intellectual pursuits. Imaginal action has taken the place of gesture or exclamation, and the resultant we call the "attitude," or the mental readiness to act.

But the process in the experience of poetry is never quite so simple as to leave a single impulse seeking its appropriate attitude; rarely or never is a poem quite so obvious, even in the most elementary poetry. At times the impulses are exceedingly numerous and varied in their character. In the quatrain from Shakespeare's Sonnet they are, with the exception of the second half of the last line, of the same general character, but the last introduces a new and paradoxical note. In his apostrophe to sleep the number and variety are increased amazingly:

> Methought I heard a voice cry "Sleep no more!
> Macbeth doth murder sleep," the innocent sleep,
> Sleep that knits up the ravelled sleave of care,
> The death of each day's life, sore labor's bath,
> Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course,
> Chief nourisher in life's feast.

The resultant attitude in cases like these must be a compromise between the varied impulses and the attitudes appropriate to each. This attitude is the final fact in the experience, the thing that gives it a unity and its character or, to use the word we used at the beginning of the chapter, completes its "form." It is this mental activity of adjustment to the experience that gives the pleasure one feels as a compensation [1] for the energy successfully expended.

If there be no final union of the varied impulses aroused by the experience of the poem; if, as we can now see, the varied details of the poetic experience do not thus fuse into a final and satisfactory whole leaving the mind free with its activity accomplished, the result is the well-known feeling of perplexity or bewilderment, and the experience has no "form." We have seen this illustrated in the extract from Milton. One might illustrate this further by a familiar and often admired poem by Joyce Kilmer.[2] The parts do not somehow seem to fuse into a whole.

I think that I shall never see
A poem lovely as a tree.

A tree whose hungry mouth is prest
Against the earth's sweet flowing breast;

A tree that looks at God all day,
And lifts her leafy arms to pray;

A tree that may in Summer wear
A nest of robins in her hair;

Upon whose bosom snow has lain,
Who intimately lives with rain.

Poems are made by fools like me,
But only God can make a tree.

[1] See also one cause for obscurity, page 26.
[2] "Trees," from *Trees and Other Poems* by Joyce Kilmer, copyrighted, 1914, by Doubleday, Doran and Company, Inc.

Some of the imagery in the stanzas is justly to be praised. But it is a poetic experience to be remembered only in its fragments, not as a whole, for it leaves no single satisfying attitude. It is like the changing figures in a kaleidoscope, only the colors change as well as the pattern.

There remain, however, two elements in the poetic experience yet to be explored, both of which are of supreme significance. It is of course impossible to separate the "thought" or "idea," or, as a psychologist may phrase it, the "reference," of a poem from the whole patterned texture of the poetic experience. It is equally inaccurate to attempt to call it the subject of a poem, or the thing the poem is about; for the subject must include not only the "idea" which can perhaps be abstracted from the poem, but also the whole texture of the author's attitude toward this, which also gives the poem its emotive color. One can no more expect, as someone has said, to draw off the thought of a poem, and hope it to exhibit signs of life, than for a lover of wild life to recognize the king of birds in the reconstructed skeleton of an eagle. An ornithologist may find this a quite appropriate subject for scientific curiosity, but this is an utterly different motive from the vital urge that rejoices in the free life of an uncaged bird. It often is no small shock of surprise to a thoughtless reader to discover also how difficult it is to abstract the thought from some of our best-known poems, and to see after we have pulled the poor abstraction away from the living tissue, how lifeless and dull the thought suddenly becomes. Shakespeare's quatrain leaves us with little more than the commonplace—"I am growing old." Wordsworth's ode on immortality is not much more than a fantastic plea for a long-discarded philosophical belief. To study a poem thus is like pulling a gorgeous jelly fish out of the water that one may examine under a microscope the secret of its magic, only to discover that what we have is not the rainbow, but a shapeless blot of protoplasm. The enjoyment of poetry does not come from such exercises, unless one is able again to return to the live poem and enjoy its vitality.

It is now possible in part to answer a question raised in the first chapter, page 12, where there were given quotations from Pope's *Essay on Man* and the chorus from *Atalanta in Calydon*. The purposes of the two poems are as different as a spring day and an essay on natural theology. Each poem has its own peculiar value, and must be judged for what it is trying to achieve. A reader may reduce the thought in the one to a logical sequence of ideas, and even, if one be disposed, discover in it a hidden logical syllogism—the thought is so neat and orderly. But it would be futile to attempt to discover any logical continuity in the other, or any idea that may be reduced to any semblance of a formula. So far as protection of thought goes, it is almost innocent in its nudity. But no reader in consequence finds himself displeased with the poem. On the contrary, each new dash of imagery, each new impulse, each throb of ecstatic joy in the warm rush of renewed life, these all combine at the end in a fused attitude of delicious abandon to the sheer joy of living.

All this by no means implies that the poem by Pope is poor in emotive value, and that it lacks the play of impulse and the final fusion into a satisfying attitude. Far from it; this poem, too, has its rich implications, but they are tied up so intimately with the thought, the imagery is used so dramatically to present the thought—indeed the imagery is the thought, and the thought the imagery—that though the poem may be adequately translated into a foreign language, and has been, it will lose something very precious in the translation, for which only as skillful a poet-translator as Pope himself can find a substitute. On the other hand, a poem whose total value, like Swinburne's, lies in its emotive potency may not under any circumstances be adequately translated. A new poem may be attempted on a similar theme, but this new one again will be as elusive and as individual as a catch of music or the perfume of spring, and never can be anything else.

The thought of a poem, then, its idea, whether it be slight or considerable in its relative significance, is woven into the texture of the whole experience as intimately as any of the poetic threads,

and enters into the final value of the resultant attitude. The poem is the evolution of a state of mind, from the original stimulus, either internal or external, to the final state of rest, when the mental activity has ceased. The thought in it is not abstract, logical thought, but a phase of the state of mind. It is only as one analyzes it later, that one may discover in it anything of a purely intellectual character. But by that time the poem has passed. Fortunately, by means of the verse it may be "read" again; this time—if the study of the thought has been fruitful—with renewed and deepened "understanding."

In some poems the thought may be the intellectual comment on the emotive experience; in others the emotion may be the emotive comment on the intellectual experience; in some the thought may even be virtually absent. But if the emotive comment be absent we have not poetry but something else. On the other hand, it is true that as the thought becomes more and more significant, the form of the poem tends to become more logical in its texture. But in any case its value will be determined by the value of the full experience, and not in terms of logic. This is not yet the time to discuss the subject of values; but it may be said in passing that there are many valuable experiences for which it would be difficult to find an adequate logical or intellectual formula—the love of nature, of a parent, or of the Deity, for example—and yet these are among some of the most accepted themes of lyric verse.

What has been said thus of poetry may also be said, with appropriate alterations, of the more emotive varieties of prose. Only here the idea or thought plays a far more obvious rôle, at times almost obscuring the significance of the accompanying emotion. Prose has a way, as we shall see in a later chapter, of reaching its goal by a different route.

When Longinus, therefore, the first critic who, so far as we know, sought in the right place for the meaning of greatness in literature, attempts a summary of the ingredients for greatness, he places as the chief qualification, "first and most important, the power of forming great conceptions." This he defines later as

"an echo" that can come only from a "noble soul." The average critic of Longinus has attempted to paraphrase this so as to define the quality of greatness of thought. But Longinus is his own best expositor, and later in the essay he gives as an example of true greatness the exquisite little love lyric of Sappho. It is not the *value* of the thought, or the idea, but the value of the total experience, that the Greek critic had in mind; and his commendation of the poem is the first unrestricted praise of love poetry that has come down to us. Sappho's lyric was great because it was accompanied with genuine passion, or emotion, and because it was a great experience. In the same manner must one search for the secret of all greatness in literature.

What is emotion, and what part does it play in the total experience which we are attempting to define under the term "form"? It is an often accepted standard of so-called romantic or impressionistic criticism, that one may measure the value of a poetic experience by the volume or depth of the emotional thrill that the reader receives. The classic answer to this is of course obviously easy, that no two persons can ever hope to get the same amount of emotion; that emotion cannot be weighed like salt; that, and worse, no one person will on two separate readings get the same emotional thrill from the same poem; and, finally, that there is no known way of estimating the relative value of the emotions. For even if the psychologist were able to accomplish the incredible and invent an emotional barometer, the readings would be so capricious that a poem chart would be a hundred times more complicated and a myriad times more difficult to read than a weather prognostication—and would be even less serviceable.

The truth seems to be that the emotions are the mental index or signs of purely physical changes in the body as a result or as an accompaniment of the progress of the experience, and signs therefore also of its success or lack of success.[1] They are pleasur-

[1] I am here deliberately passing over the problem of the impossibility of long maintaining a difference between the physical and mental. The student has the opportunity of referring to any sane textbook on psychology.

able if the experience is accomplishing itself; that is, if the impulses are acting freely, and in the resultant attitude winning an accommodating compromise in which the claims of all are adequately satisfied. As such, they may be likened to the pleasing purr of a well-oiled machine traveling without obstruction on a smooth highway. But if the impulses are thwarted, or some of them, and the final attitude is unattainable, they are like the engine missing in its cylinders, or working with a shaft not adequately connected, and there are raps and bumps and grinding of gears. The experience is progressing painfully, or even stops progressing.[1]

In consequence it often is true that a very slight or relatively unimportant experience may carry a relatively high emotional thrill, like a river-rat of a tug that blows an ocean-going siren. But it is only the careless who do not look closely for the cause of the disturbance who will be deceived. Here is a little poem by John V. A. Weaver, pathetic no doubt, but not even near great, for it is relatively easy to raise the pulse beat over the story of women or children, in adversity, the mother, home, and heaven themes in poetry or fiction, or the "movie."[2]

One day Ma came home
  And says, "Look what I got!"
And it was a little plant
  In a round pot.
Then she put it in the window
  And says, "Watch it grow.
It'll have a pretty flower
  First thing you know."

So all the time, weeks and weeks
  I kept waterin' it.
The wall next door was very high.
  It hardly got a bit
Of sunshine. It was dark

[1] I am reminded here of a remark by Aristotle: "It is pleasant to complete what is defective, for the whole thing thereupon becomes our own work." This is the pleasure of all completed or satisfactory mental activity, and is equally the pleasure in reading.

[2] "The Foolish Plant," from *More in American*, published by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

All day. And at night
I thought it was kept awake
By the arc light.

It wouldn't bloom; and it never
Growed worth a cent.
I think it was a silly plant,
Because it got all bent
Stretching toward that arc light
Like it was tied. . . .
When I told her what I thought,
Ma cried.

It is precisely in places like this that may be found the difference between what is called true sentiment and sentimentality. The sentimental exploits a ready and popularly prepared theme for its particular and popularly predictable thrill. Hence the things we grow sentimental over change with our fashions, for we respond to them, not because of the vital urge of the experience itself, but because a social habit has already prepared the way for the responses, and the thrill is in vogue. But we shall have occasion to touch this subject in more detail later.

This particular fault lies very close to what Coleridge called "mental bombast," an artificial stimulation, as it were, of the impulses in a more or less commonplace experience, either by means of imagery or by a metaphorical raising of one's voice and gesticulation, and lending thus a convincingness to the experience which the poet nowhere quite feels. Coleridge was daring enough to hold out the closing lines of Wordsworth's poem on the daffodils as an example. I believe it is possible more than once to catch the same strain in Browning's *Prospice*:

Fear death—to feel the fog in my throat,
The mist in my face,
When the snows begin, and the blasts denote
I am nearing the place,
The power of the night, the press of the storm,
The post of the foe;

Where he stands, the Arch Fear in a visible form,
Yet the strong man must go:
For the journey is done and the summit attained,
And the barriers fall,
Though a battle's to fight ere the guerdon be gained,
The reward of it all.
I was ever a fighter, so—one fight more,
The best and the last!
I would hate that death bandaged my eyes, and forbore,
And bade me creep past.
No! let me taste the whole of it, fare like my peers
The heroes of old,
Bear the brunt, in a minute pay glad life's arrears
Of pain, darkness and cold.
For sudden the worst turns the best to the brave,
The black minute's at end,
And the elements' rage, the fiend-voices that rave,
Shall dwindle, shall blend,
Shall change, shall become first a peace out of pain,
Then a light, then a breast,
O thou soul of my soul! I shall clasp thee again,
And with God be the rest!

Of such a nature are all efforts to secure a value to poetry by playing up its emotional quality, perhaps at the expense of the final attitude. Not very different is a more modern impressionistic vice of exaggerating the purely eccentric in a lyric experience. A poem like this on April by Edna St. Vincent Millay leaves a careful reader uncomfortable.[1]

To what purpose, April, do you return again?
Beauty is not enough.
You can no longer quiet me with the redness
Of little leaves opening stickily.
I know what I know.
The sun is hot on my neck as I observe
The spikes of the crocus.
The smell of the earth is good.

[1] Published by Harper & Brothers, reprinted by permission of Miss Millay.

It is apparent that there is no death.
But what does that signify?
Not only under ground are the brains of men
Eaten by maggots.
Life in itself
Is nothing,
An empty cup, a flight of uncarpeted stairs.
It is not enough that yearly, down this hill,
April
Comes like an idiot, babbling and strewing flowers!

For it is not to the passing emotional responses that one must look for the value of a poem. These have their value, but their recollection fades rapidly—they are almost "writ in water" and as impotent as last year's birds' nests. What is of value is the completed "form" of the experience, and not its emotional shadow, and the final attitude in which it leaves the reader. This is no fleeting substance but a very real acquisition, something, if it be new, that has entered into and thus in a measure transformed a personality.

It is this final perfection of form that gives to good poetry and imaginative prose that peculiar disinterested quality which some have called æsthetic distance, though I do not like the phrase. But an illustration ought to make it clear. Many a soldier can now look back on his most trying experiences with almost a pleasurable detachment; the various elements have fallen into some agreeable pattern, colored now by an emotion very different from the bewilderment or torment that once obscured rather than revealed the significance of the situation. This means nothing more than that the thing finally has taken on form, and that the mind is able to stand aloof and contemplate it in its entirety. In a way, it has been objectified.

The same truth holds for a poet's experience. Only as a rule he is able to throw it from him, as it were, more readily, and regard it almost as though he were a spectator and not an actor. This is no more than what Wordsworth means when he describes poetry as the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes

its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity"; thus the poet gets from it the thrill of the spectator and the disinterested understanding. He is his own audience, and its communication a kind of talking to oneself. Hence the dramatist or novelist is not any one of his characters, unless he is giving us his autobiography, but his gaze wanders over the whole scene, searching and discovering its full value.

The same reason will explain why a reader responds so instantly with a feeling of security when he undertakes a poem or novel that has been given complete form. Even from the first, though the pattern is yet unrevealed, he can find the assurance of a master guide who will take him through what in ordinary life would be a bewilderment, and bring him to the journey's end in safety. The unskillful novel or the unformed poem, on the other hand, early betrays the fact that we are in the hands of an ignorant guide and may lose the way. This fact is a valuable one and will have to be explored for its full significance later.[1]

Reading a poem, likewise a novel or drama, is then a mental experience, and, so far as the mental act goes, not dissimilar to the experience of the poet. The poem, or the novel, or the drama, is the experience, and it is a thing which has been given "form." How then, we may ask, does the poetic, or so-called literary experience, differ from the ordinary experiences of everyday life? And further, how does the poet differ from the average individual, the professional man, who practices law, or cobbles shoes, or writes a book on criticism? These should be interesting questions to explore.[2]

To many of us, late in life usually, there comes the shock of the meaninglessness of the whole business of living, a feeling, to misapply these lines of Wordsworth's sonnet, that

> late and soon,
> Getting and spending we lay waste our powers.

[1] See Chapter XV.

[2] A more complete definition of poetry and its relation to prose will be given when it is more appropriate in later chapters. For the present it is necessary only to say that the word poet is used loosely, and includes many who write in prose.

The whole matter of living is professionalized, with the main issue always held admiringly out before us by efficiency organized to reduce our day's business and relaxations to conventional rule. In a moment of bitterness even the genial Goethe breaks out into satire: "Feed and clothe ourselves, rear children, feed them, as well as we may, this is a people's struggle and cry."

We are regimented in our business and our professions; and our training even from our earliest years is directed in no small measure, directly or indirectly, to technical efficiency. How affectionately we play with the term "practical"; even our cultural training, it is argued seriously, has also a practical value—a value that may be measured by the rod of financial success. It is not that we are by nature grasping, or at heart guilty of the deadly sin of covetousness. But our very generosity is organized like our business, and put on the same basis; not a spontaneous outpouring of the heart, but a "service" that, like bread cast judicially upon the waters, will bring results. The whole affair of making a living and helping others to make theirs is as mechanically organized as social consciousness and social ingenuity can make it. How seldom in it do we see the rare spontaneous man!

Even our relaxations are now as carefully organized, and by entrepreneurs for a consideration. We take our pleasures by rote, as children are put through their exercises at school. We tour this country or Europe in selected bands, and are drilled during the process as though we were raw recruits being put through the manual of arms. Amazingly clever advertisements and persuasive *ciceroni* invade with their ballyhoo one's most sacred hours. So we take to golf, to traveling, to fishing, as the healthy boy takes to long division and quadratics, and with about the same amount of generous pleasure. How rare again is that man or woman who can enjoy leisure alone. We dread leisure, and are bored by our own company, and so we proceed to invent the telephone, the radio, the movie, and the automobile.

What opportunity is there in all this round of carefully conventionalized and mechanized business and relaxation—for one may well fear that we are losing the art of pleasure—for spon-

taneous experience? The only experiences most are ready to accept are those for which they have been carefully predisposed or drilled, those which are socially valuable and upon which society has set its stamp of approval. Against all others we set up bars, inhibiting them before they begin, or before the impulses have begun to show their strangeness; for they lead into unfamiliar places, and interrupt the main business of life. Our lives tend to take on a pattern woven by social usage for the problem of meeting successfully the main issue of the social organization. Too wide a departure from this is unconsciously yet very really socially reprehensible, for it introduces a new and perhaps dangerously paradoxical design which might ruin the social pattern. So we follow the line of least resistance—most of us—and accept the lead of the majority, stay in the rut, build up dikes to keep out the strange, the spontaneous, and the new. For shrouded though it may be in a mystical poetic creed, it is as a plea for the spontaneous life, life that seems spontaneous only in childhood before habits are formed, that Wordsworth's *Ode on Intimations of Immortality* is so precious. It is the poet's comment on the unpoetic life.

Furthermore, what relatively few opportunities we have in life to complete satisfactorily even the most meager of experiences. We are beset by the flux of life, and equipped with a nervous mechanism to respond even to the most delicate stimulus. We are, as it were, a receiving station in the midst of a hurricane of ether waves coming from every possible direction and carrying every conceivable variety of program; we tune in here for a moment, but are interrupted by a more insistent message, and before the second has been caught, a third and a fourth clamor for attention. Precisely with this motive, all are compelled to build dikes to protect the main interest, and to keep out irrelevant or insistent experiences, of which we catch longing glimpses over the level of the bars.

To put it in language a psychologist might understand, few of the experiences that come to us possess adequate "form," for we have neither the leisure nor the opportunity to undertake them,

or fully to "understand" them when undertaken, much less the desire or the ability to communicate them. By "understanding" an experience we mean a complete grasp of the whole situation, with all its elements, a complete fusion of all of the impulses, and the attainment of an adequate and satisfactory attitude. Instead our way is strewn with piecemeal fragments of experiences, things which might have been valuable had we allowed them to take their course, but which we jettisoned to preserve perhaps a more spuriously valuable cargo.

But in good poetry, as in all imaginative literature, the experiences are complete; they come already prepared and in "form." We all carry the materials of poetry in us, but it becomes available for poetry only when it is given "form."[1] It is the imagination, in short, that has this power of understanding and catching the full significance of an experience and of fusing all its details into a single pattern, a single effect, and of assigning to it value. We shall have occasion, in a later chapter, to define more accurately this faculty when we come to discuss the question of value in poetry. Unlike our ordinary unalert attitude toward life, with its restricted and essentially practical and prosaic interests, is the alert attitude with the imagination always awake to welcome a new stimulus and a new experience, or discover a new set of values in the old.

Perhaps no poet or critic has so enthusiastically set out in a glowing, though mystical, definition the secret of great literature, as Shelley. We may have to discount and translate into a language we all can understand some of his phrases, but the thought behind is as sound today as it was when the first poet looked upon the world of experience and saw it was good. "Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar. . . ." Poetry perceives "the unapprehended relations of things."

The world to Homer's contemporaries must have looked as drab and as utterly bent on the main issue of food and offspring as the world today. To a person with the practical eye, there

[1] Croce, *Æstetica*, p. 30.

would be as little difference then between an Achilles and a Thersites as some of our modern biographical critics are fond of maintaining. But Homer with an imagination saw life differently, and ever after the world has owed ancient Greece a vast gratitude.

This the gods wrought, they spun the skein of death for some, that others hereafter might have a song.

Nature and the natives of mountain villages were a thin food for the literary personages of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. When these went to nature they took along with them the paraphernalia of pastoral romance; and the woods and fields and the shepherds and shepherdesses in their poems were not the nature and the people of real life, but poetic feignings as foreign to Europe then as the Saurians and the Neanderthal man today. And yet Wordsworth and a few like him tasted nature undiluted and unadulterated with conventionalized fancies, and their attitude of pleasure is ours today for the asking. That is, they succeeded in creating a new "form" for experiences in nature and discovering new values. Thus, experiences for which the many once could find no form, and which they refused to receive, became through the poet available for all; and thus by giving form to the otherwise formless, he "purged from the inward sight the film of familiarity," and revealed "the wonder of our being." We can never guess at the unrevealed possibilities of our experiences until a poet has put them into form for us.[1]

But who is the poet, and how does he differ from us to whom the vision has been denied? Shelley in the same essay has declared him to be the legislator for mankind and the founder of civil societies. He is the "happiest, the best, the wisest, and the most illustrious of mankind." Certainly there will need to be some discount here, we exclaim. Shelley himself persecuted, Dante a

[1] I think this note will explain the difference that Aristotle in his *Poetics* makes between History and Poetry. "Poetry is more serious and philosophical than history"; it deals with the "universal," history with the concrete. It is unwise and unwarranted, it would seem, to regard this distinction as one involving realism and idealism, as is often done. Poetry deals with the universal because its experiences are not subject to the whim of chance or caprice, but to the "imagination" of the poet. History, because it deals with fact, must limit itself to the point of view of fact, and hence often to the incomplete and "unformed."

refugee for nearly the whole of his poetical life, Milton blind and in disgrace, seem hardly to deserve the epithet happy. Lucretius was poisoned early by a jealous woman, so the story goes; and the list might be expanded indefinitely to prove that, as Goethe wrote, tears and the bread of sorrow are the only offering through which one may approach the Heavenly Powers. If poets are happy as the poet describes them, the word here must have a significance somewhat different from what it has in our daily use.

The poet is less regimented and preoccupied than the rest of us, and hence touches life at more and different points. It is a mistake—a cardinal error—to suppose that the poet is one who voluntarily retires from the world that he may practice the austere asceticism of poetry. He is no recluse. The world's greatest poets were men who had taken part in the affairs of men, and with their abilities no unworthy part. Homer's description of fighting and bloodshed is so relentless that not even Plato can convince one that he had not seen armies led, if he had not led them in person. He knew the life he was describing, and his was not the knowledge of the idle spectator. Chaucer, Milton, Shakespeare, Dante, and even Goethe, were not mere professional poets; in most cases their professions had little to do with the art of versification, though they gave this avocation the best of their powers. They lived and acquired experience, came to know men and the motives by which men are moved, and wrote from their deeper knowledge. It is this knowledge that gives the poet his "feeling eye" and "seeing hand."

The poet, because he is less preoccupied, is better able to respond to the stimulus against which others at once raise a barrier. He has a freer and more available fund of past experience upon which to draw when dealing with the present, and thus by means of the available past can enrich the present. This is nothing more than to say that the poet has the power of bringing into association the things of the past that may be of value for the present; not necessarily that he has a better memory than most of us, as we understand memory, but that he is able freely to revive past "states of mind" and the impulses associated with them. It is

this sign of the alertness of the poet, not only to the stimulus but also to the valuable in the past, that surprises and dismays the ordinary pedestrian mind. Little things, apparently, like a stray dash of color, a whiff of perfume, a new musical note, that by us are unnoticed or mean no more than the primrose by the river's brim, start strange and unexpected reverberations in his mind. In his presence we are ever being led into extraordinary adventures and amazing pilgrimages. A trip to Canterbury in the fourteenth century was no modern pleasure jaunt; the inns were uncomfortable and the roads narrow, and one's companions as commonplace and boring as fellow travelers today; and yet Chaucer found more than a score of distinct personalities among the group with which he foregathered, and his portraits of them are a revelation of his poetic power.

The poet, like any other creator, has an imagination with a larger scope than the one we need for the routine of daily life. We might compare him to a child who can manage complicated architectural designs with his building blocks, before whose "imaginative" resourcefulness a less skillful child stands convicted. This is nothing more than to say that he is able to have a larger and more significant experience. He can manage successfully a larger number of extremely paradoxical impulses and bring them to a satisfactory attitude.[1] Take, for example, this sonnet of Keats:

Much have I travell'd in the realms of gold,
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;
Round many western islands have I been
Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.
Oft of one wide expanse had I been told
That deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne:
Yet did I never breathe its pure serene
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:
Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken;
Or like stout Cortez, when with eagle eyes

[1] See Matthew Arnold, Preface, 1858, Oxford Poems.

He stared at the Pacific—and all his men
Look'd at each other with a wild surmise—
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

Keats had read deeply in the romances of Spenser and others, knew the fine poetry of English literature, but had never seen his horizon lifted so that he could gaze on the classic serenity of Homer. What amazing impulses this new vision rouses in the poet!

Dante in the lowest circles of Hell comes upon a most revolting scene. There frozen in the ice before him are two figures—so close together that

One head was to the other as a hood;
And as one in his hunger bites his bread,
So had the upper one set in his teeth
There where the other's brain joined with
his nape.

The poet, with every sense in revolt at the sight, asks who they are:

Lifting his mouth up from his fell repast
That sinner wiped it on the hair upon
The head which he had at the back despoiled.
Then he began—[1]

Scarcely in all literature is there a scene so nauseating—not cannibalism alone, but cannibalism in Hell! Every impulse is now thrilling with disgust. But note the power of the poet. Before Count Ugolino has gone ten lines in the story of the treachery that undid him and his sons, we forget the fell repast, forget we are in ice, forget the whole dismal background of Hell, and live the pathetic story of one who had been greatly sinned against. We needed the first impulse from the picture of disgust against which to project the impulse of pity from the story—disgust and pity, these are the two incompatible motives the poet has woven into a single pattern. It would be difficult for a less skillful poet

[1] *Inferno*, xxxii-xxxiii, Johnson translation, published by the Yale University Press.

to attempt this joust; the result in all probability would be only grotesque.

Again, Milton in his character of Satan gives us a most marvelous personality, asserting the worth of his dignity and place even amid the horrors of Hell. It is hard to think of a greater paradox—the abjectness of his defeat, the burning lake and the frozen continent of his prison, the utter rout of his splendid followers, the disillusionment of all his ambition; and yet his magnificent cry of undefeated self-assertion. All this in the character of the heroic Satan is well known to us—but the amazing scope of the poet's imagination is not fully revealed until to this defeated but undaunted hero is presented the sight of the first woman—Eve. Her charm and grace, her innocence, for a moment disarm even the Devil:

> That space the Evil One distracted stood
> From his own evil, and for the time remained
> *Stupidly good.*

A lesser poet might have incited the Devil to love or lust, or have left him unmoved. But Milton made him for an instant lapse into dull stupid goodness! The Devil does not lose character; he reveals a new depth in his complex personality.[1]

The moral is that the poet is not bound by the ordinary routine or the usual conventions by which we regulate or safeguard experience. We have not yet raised the question of the value of his experiences, or when he is a good and when a dangerous poet. But it means that the poet is more finely organized, with his whole nature more in tune, so that he responds to a stimulus, not partially, but with his whole personality. Or to put it in another manner, to most of us, except for that part to which we direct practical interest, most of life lies in a chaos of repressed or only partly achieved experience, with starts and inhibitions, false trails, enforced detours and returns, like a series of dream journeys that never come off but are ever on the point of getting under way. To the poet in this sense life is more orderly, and hence he

[1] It is precisely this ability to select the most appropriate and vital impulse among the many available, that is one of the chief signs of great poetic genius.

well deserves Shelley's epithet of wise and just. He is wise and just to himself and to experience. That he is happier than the most may also be true, for if happiness be the name for free, self-directed activity and a set of self-imposed values, he will be happy.[1]

But for this happiness, too, there is exacted from the poet a penalty. One we shall discuss when we turn to the subject of values. But another is more immediate. Society takes its revenge for non-conformity; and the poet is a non-conformist at least, for he sets lighter store by the things society regards as the all-important. At best we call him fantastic, queer, eccentric, because his ways are not our ways. His delight in a flower is set down as light-mindedness, and his disregard of the latest vogue as a pose. But there are times when his rebellion against the social code is held up to him as a crime. The world has crucified its poets as well as its prophets and saviors.[2]

[1] I like this from Goethe's *Sprüche in Prosa: Den Stoff sieht jedermann vor sich; den Gehalt sieht nur der, der etwas dazu zu thun hat, und die Forme ist ein Geheimnis den Meisten.*" Form is a secret to most, although all have the matter of life in common.

[2] One remembers in this connection the excellent poem by Edward Arlington Robinson on Shakespeare, *Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford.*

Chapter IV

THE PROBLEM OF COMMUNICATION—STYLE

A COMPLICATED PROCESS—THE PROCESS OF COMMUNICATION—THE ORIGINAL ATTITUDE—SIMPLE AND COMPLEX ATTITUDES—UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCE—THE SYMBOLISM OF COMMUNICATION—ECONOMY IN SYMBOLS—LAVISHNESS IN SYMBOLS—STYLE—DEFINITIONS—STYLE THE MANNER OF USING SYMBOLS—STYLE FOR STYLE'S SAKE—MANNERISMS—PROSE AND VERSE—THE SCOPE OF PROSE—THE SCOPE OF POETRY—POETRY AND THE POEM—EMOTIONAL VALUE OF PROSE—THE INCOMMUNICABLE.

In Horace's *de Arte Poetica* there is a line, which in the history of criticism has been more frequently quoted, at least in the past, than any other single utterance concerning the art of literature.

Scribendi recte sapere est et principium et fons.

The Latin poet is thinking chiefly of poetry when he gives the suggestion that to write well one must *know* what one is writing about; but curiously the advice is generally and most easily applied to the writing of pure prose, and for an obvious reason—the content of such prose is more tangible and more easily studied. But for the themes of imaginative literature, the material is not quite so obvious, as we have seen, and the advice almost gratuitous; for we have already had a hint that the problem of "knowing" an experience is complicated. It will also be discovered that the question of knowing how it may be best "communicated" has some further interesting complications of its own.

"Pure" thought, on the other hand, is simple enough to communicate, for it deals with the abstract, for which the symbols are

always adequate. For example, a problem in geometry, like that on the angles of an equilateral triangle, can be communicated with perfect precision; so can the results of an experiment in science, or the classification and description of the various parts of a flower, for here we are dealing not with any specific triangle, or any specific flower, but with all triangles of the given variety and all flowers of a certain class. The symbols, then, which we employ to communicate the thought, the lines and diagrams, the formulas and the words, are perfectly able to control the reader's response, and to guide his thought to the desired conclusion, the only condition being that he have the necessary experience with the thought and the symbols to follow.[1]

But the moment the thought becomes concrete, that is, the moment it becomes a part of a certain particular and hence peculiar experience, the communication becomes correspondingly more difficult. The reason is not difficult to fathom, for the experience will have the peculiar "form" that the author has given it, and in consequence will have the flavor of his particular impulses and emotions that have been aroused, and the final "emotive attitude." All this gives the experience a certain fairly definite quality—something personal, as it were, a proprietary interest, a value; and the manner of communicating it will be correspondingly different from the purely impersonal manner of pure or abstract thought.

Now all literature, whether it be in the form of the brief lyric or the long novel or biography or even history—when it is something more than a piece of scholarship—is an attempt at precisely this specific problem—to communicate an experience which has taken "form" and resulted in a certain definite "emotive attitude," and hence has personal value to the author. For it must be translated into symbols, symbols which in addition to carrying the load of the thought must also carry the precious and perishable excess of the author's emotion and attitude. And in

[1] But "pure" prose, or "pure" thought, is rarely found. Croce's remark is worth quoting: "Poetry is the language of sentiment; prose of the intellect; but since the intellect when dealing with the concrete is reality, and so sentiment, all prose has a poetic aspect." The significance of this we shall see later.

written speech the author has at his disposal only the simple signs that can be printed upon the page. How can he with these arbitrary marks so control the reader's experience that when it is complete, there may be possible some conformity between the attitude of the writer and that now of the reader?

We may, if we wish to employ technical terms, call this original attitude with which the process of communication begins, an intuition,[1] if we follow the example of Benedetto Croce. More loosely we might call it the inspiration of the work of art. All of us, in one form or other, have felt these motives; and we have felt also the urge to utter them. But the artist, with his heightened powers of feeling and his larger skill in his technique, feels the need to unburden himself far more keenly, and has his means of communication under more perfect control. "By elaborating his impressions," writes Croce, "man frees himself from them. By objectifying them, he removes them from him and makes himself their superior."

All literature is thus the elaborating and communicating of this emotive attitude—or, as it is put by J. Middleton Murry a trifle less accurately perhaps, "the thought that plays a part in literature is systematized emotion." The plot, so-called, the structure of the poem or the novel, the various technical devices so carefully described and explained by the rhetorician, all these matters which might be grouped under the term *style,* are a part of the means adopted by the author to further the communication. Emotion alone, which has not been synthesized into an attitude, is exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to communicate, and at best futile, for it quickly fades in the very effort to communicate it. On the other hand, the so-called logical structure alone—the purely intellectual content in the communication, if it be studied for itself, as in an analysis of a novel or play, is as bare and featureless and repellent as the skull of poor Yorick. The imagination can get little comfort from the fossils of literature. Again to quote Croce, but this time taking perhaps an unwarranted lib-

[1] It will be noticed by those who have made the acquaintance of Croce's theory that in the argument that follows there is a complete difference between what Croce calls the "expression" and what here is called "communication."

erty with his meaning, "Expression is a synthesis of the various, the multiple into one." The problem of communication is to reproduce the organic unity of the original attitude, to fuse again the varied impulses, emotions, and thoughts aroused during the induced experience in the reader, and to do it by the stimulus of purely objective symbols—in brief, to control the experience of the reader.

It is likewise this attitude that gives the work unity, its theme, and the means also by which we can judge the success of the author in his communication. Some one has said that the intention of any poet or novelist may be summarized in a sentence of ten words. And so far as the great works of literature are concerned, this is most emphatically true. Notice how Homer, Virgil, and even Milton in the very first words of their poems set forth the poet's task, and how all that follows is the fulfillment of the promise. But more than this is the tone of the author's experience, and this too can be adequately defined as briefly. Indeed, it is by no means an exaggeration to say that the true power of a poem or any other work of art lies in the inspiration of this compelling motive.

For the moment this particular emotive attitude becomes to the poet or writer the most significant thing in the world—it is in a way his clue to the riddle or part of the riddle of living. If it be relatively of lesser scope, it expresses a mood predominant for the moment, and tinges with its color the immediate details of the poet's life. I am thinking now of an attitude like that which prompted Keats' *La Belle Dame Sans Merci,* a mood of ethereal romantic melancholy, steeped in the sensuous imagery of a past and futile dream. Its very unreality and futility are its chief charm. It is not great poetry, though it prompted the immature flowering of a lot of hotbed poetry for the Pre-Raphaelites, but it is worth a score of *Blessed Damozels.*

O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,
Alone and palely loitering?
The sedge has wither'd from the lake,
And no birds sing.

O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,
So haggard and so woe-begone?
The squirrel's granary is full,
And the harvest's done.

I see a lily on thy brow
With anguish moist and fever dew,
And on thy cheeks a fading rose
Fast withereth too.

I met a lady in the meads,
Full beautiful—a faery's child,
Her hair was long, her foot was light,
And her eyes were wild.

I made a garland for her head,
And bracelets too, and fragrant zone;
She look'd at me as she did love,
And made sweet moan.

I set her on my pacing steed,
And nothing else saw all day long,
For sidelong would she bend, and sing
A faery's song.

She found me roots of relish sweet,
And honey wild, and manna dew,
And sure in language strange she said—
"I love thee true."

She took me to her elfin grot,
And there she wept, and sigh'd full sore,
And there I shut her wild, wild eyes
With kisses four.

And there she lulled me asleep,
And there I dream'd—Ah! woe betide!
The latest dream I ever dream'd
On the cold hill's side.

I saw pale kings and princes too,
  Pale warriors, death-pale were they all;
They cried—"La Belle Dame sans Merci
  Hath thee in thrall!"

I saw their starved lips in the gloam,
  With horrid warning gapèd wide,
And I awoke and found me here,
  On the cold hill's side.

And this is why I sojourn here,
  Alone and palely loitering,
Though the sedge is wither'd from the lake,
  And no birds sing.

Far more generous in scope, though no less poignantly personal, is the note of wistful melancholy striving for its own cure, which the same poet, already stricken with a mortal illness, felt as he gazed on the steadfastness of the star, and contrasted his restlessness with nature's tranquillity. Here the scope of the poet's attitude has been enlarged and has become a pattern for the whole of life. The whole universe, stars and earth, have been subdued to the dominant quality of the poet's intuition. When he comes to express himself in the communication he lays hands upon all and brings them into the texture of the experience.

Bright star! would I were steadfast as thou art—
  Not in lone splendour hung aloft the night,
And watching, with eternal lids apart,
  Like Nature's patient sleepless Eremite,
The moving waters at their priestlike task
  Of pure ablution round earth's human shores,
Or gazing on the new soft fallen mask
  Of snow upon the mountains and the moors—
No—yet still steadfast, still unchangeable,
  Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast,
To feel for ever its soft fall and swell,
  Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,
  Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,
And so live ever—or else swoon to death.

Or the attitude may in its pattern be so complex as to demand of its possessor for its adequate communication a much larger canvas than a lyric poem. In its "sense of the quality of life as a whole" it may require life as a whole to be laid before the reader before it can be thoroughly "understood." Of such a nature are the attitudes that prompt the writings of dramas, or epics, or novels. Thomas Hardy's sense of the overpowering mystery of Egdon Heath, which becomes for him the symbol of the mystery of life, required nothing less than the epical *Return of the Native* to render its utterance adequate. And Anatole France's disillusioned nihilism weaves the plot of the *Rôtisserie de la reine Pédauque* to show the utter futility of the usual motives of romance. The young hero of a cook shop goes forth on the lure of adventure, like a young D'Artagnan, but each of the episodes sees an illusion destroyed, until at the end of it all, after he has seen and known the world, or what Anatole France thinks is the world, he retires again to his spit—Tournebroche, a disappointed and disillusioned boy Cinderella.

But the mere management of the external details of the narrative or poem, the arrangement of the varied incidents into a chain logically held together and leading to the final scene when all questions shall be answered and the action brought to a close, this is not all there is to the question of plot. For there is also a management of the inner details of an extended experience, the play of impulses and emotion, the rise and fall of interest and the management of suspense—all this, the spirit of the experience and of which the external incidents are as it were the body, is of the highest importance. It is for the reason that plot involves something much more than the management of interesting or surprising incidents, that there are so few people who can tell a story well. The mere externals of the narrative any one may discover, but its truly complex nature and its inner significance only a higher talent may guess.

But we have anticipated. Before the emotive attitude may be adequately communicated, it must be fully conceived, or "expressed," as Croce uses the term. Its full possibilities must be

explored and its association with past experience made vital and significant for the reader. Wordsworth in his preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* has a word concerning this process of the poet's mind that is full of significant relevancy.

> All good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: and though this be true, poems to which any value can be attached were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who, being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply. For our continued influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts, which are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings; and, as by contemplating the relation of these general representatives to each other, we discover what is really important to men, so, by the repetition and continuance of this act, our feelings will be connected with important subjects, till at length, if we be originally possessed of much sensibility, such habits of mind will be produced, that, by obeying blindly and mechanically the impulses of those habits, we shall describe objects, and utter sentiments, of such a nature, and in such connection with each other, that the understanding of the Reader must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, and his affections strengthened and purified.

We can discard in the last phrase the apparently obvious moral bias, for we can only guess at its real meaning. But Wordsworth was unfortunate in one respect, at least; he was born before modern psychology had invented its jargon, and in consequence several of the terms he so loosely employs will need to be more definitely adjusted. What he means by thought is by no means to be construed as pure thought, but as the exercise of the whole personality of the poet, his imagination. He is describing the process by which a potent emotive attitude, what he calls a "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," is organized by the whole mental faculty of the author into a significant unit, with associations from past experience, as they are valuable, called in to render the experience more satisfactory for communication. This is by no means always a conscious act; with most poets, as he says, it is more or less mechanical, but nevertheless very real. We might call the whole process a crystallization, and it

might be compared, to use a crude figure, to the pattern into which the iron filings fall on a piece of paper, beneath which is a magnet. The magnet is the original attitude of the poet, induced by the first experience; the power it exerts is the dominant force of the attitude which compels the details to be communicated to assume a pattern which shall express its unique compulsion. The details are, as it were, the elements of the experience, in all their new richness, and now prepared for the reader.

For this communication, whether it be of a brief lyric or of an elaborate novel or drama, we have only more or less inadequate symbols: once the spoken word, a vocal gesture, with its accompanying movements of head, arms and body, but now a symbol of the symbol, the word groupings, their rhythm, and rhymes and, if we read aloud, pitch. In addition, and of extreme importance, there are those things which rhetoricians since Aristotle have mistakenly discussed as the ornaments of style—imagery and allusion. Out of these is constructed, as it were architecturally, following or accompanying the urge of the experience, the complete symbol of the writer's experience. The writer lives again the experience as he "composes" the symbols, or brings to it new richness, as the search for adequate symbols calls up by association a new range of vivid impulses, each setting up its new reverberations. In vivid reality the writer relives his experience as he composes, and lives it more abundantly in the process of attempting to communicate it.[1]

The art of composition, therefore, and the so-called laws of rhetoric are rather a matter of technique for the use of symbols, like the principles which all painters must learn before they can successfully lay paint on canvas. They are a far different thing from the so-called laws of logic, which in their formal aspect, at least, seem to deal with principles as absolute as the laws of

[1] It may be of interest to some to compare this statement of the process of communication with Croce's *Æsthetics*, XV. To Croce, communication is a totally different process from expression, the latter being purely mental and æsthetic, the former "practical" and "mechanical" and hence intellectual. To Croce, so far as the poet is concerned, it is a matter of profound indifference whether the work of art once *expressed* is ever *communicated*. But this theory of Croce is based upon indifferent psychology. The poet's mind, like all minds, works as a whole.

mathematics. These deal adequately enough with pure thought, abstracted of all emotive content, and hence susceptible of precise communication. But, with our problem of literary communication, there is always the vivid uniqueness of the experience, which might even invent a new symbolism, and must always find its own way adequately or inadequately to use and improve the old. For such the laws of rhetoric can at best prescribe only an elastic set of formulas, or say certain vague truths, like the necessity of observing the principles of unity, mass, and coherence, which mean nothing more than that one must have a genuine experience which has fought its way to a satisfactory attitude, before one can communicate it.[1] The trouble with our use of symbols, even in cheap newspapers and magazines, is not that such writers do not know how to use them, but that they have nothing genuine to write about. And this fact should not be wondered at in this age when free access to the typewriter and rotary press does not guarantee literary qualifications.

It is astonishing how genius with the utmost simplicity of symbols is able to achieve a miracle. Rarely has an account of a battle been better done than in the following brief account of the battle of Waterloo in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair:*

All our friends took their share and fought like men in the great field. All day long, whilst the women were praying ten miles away, the lines of the dauntless English infantry were receiving and repelling the furious charges of the French horsemen. Guns which were heard at Brussels were ploughing up their ranks, and comrades falling, and the resolute survivors closing in. Towards evening, the attack of the French, repeated and resisted so bravely, slackened in its fury. They had other foes besides the British to engage, or were preparing for a final onset. It came at last: the columns of the Imperial Guard marched up the hill of Saint Jean, at length and at once to sweep the English from the height which they had maintained all day, and spite of all: unscared by the thunder of the artillery, which hurled death from the English line—the dark rolling column pressed on and

[1] It is interesting to note that Aristotle in his *Rhetoric* sees the vital necessity of looking beyond mere demonstration, *i.e.,* the appeal to the intellect, to the hearer's state of mind. "The orator must . . . put his hearers into the right frame of mind." See Book II, where the various states of mind are fully described.

up the hill. It seemed almost to crest the eminence, when it began to wave and falter. Then it stopped, still facing the shot. Then at last the English troops rushed from the post from which no enemy had been able to dislodge them, and the Guard turned and fled.

No more firing was heard at Brussels—the pursuit rolled miles away. Darkness came down on the field and city: and Amelia was praying for George, who was lying on his face, dead, with a bullet through his heart.

There is not one figure of speech here that calls attention to itself—the figures that are used are battered reminiscences of figures that in ordinary prose have long lost their force, *ploughed, sweep away, crested,* yet the whole experience is charged with emotion, until in the last sentence one has almost tragedy. For such simplicity of means and potency of the result one must look only to genius.

Here is another example, this time in verse, Goethe's *Wanderer's Night Song.* I give it in the original German, for no translation can be adequate to its exquisite simplicity and yet haunting power.

Über allen Gipfeln
Ist Ruh;
In allen Wipfeln
Spürest du
Kaum einen Hauch;
Die Vögel schweigen im Walde.
Warte nur, balde
Ruhest du auch.

It might be well, for the sake of illustration, to find a contrast to these two examples of nearly perfect communication. Beside genius like Thackeray or Goethe, a piece of journalism, which is in effect a mere congeries of details, interesting perhaps, but not fused into the totality of an experience, becomes painfully obvious in its futility. I pick almost at random from the current magazines on not dissimilar themes.

A whining noise came from the blackness beyond. It was slight at first and apparently harmless. It fascinated Higgins and he strained his nerves to listen. The noise grew louder, became like the frenzied scream of someone shouting against his ears. He felt himself tighten and press his body against the bank. Then the ground shook and through the darkness floated a stinging vapor that poured into his mouth and nostrils. It cut at his chest like a finely pointed knife. His cold hands went shakily for his mask. He got it on, but it was of no use. The high explosive smoke passed unharmed through the chemicals and cut into his lungs.

The roar still echoing in the ravine, that little whining noise was heard again: a shell burst close by, throwing mud and rock and jagged steel casing. Young Higgins cringed.

. . . . . .

The hurtling shells came out of the night and ended with the night. Dawn spread a ghastly quiet over the ravine, but Higgins remained looking out over the field that had now become a rolling sea of green wheat-stalks. He dreaded to turn his head, for he knew that fear and horror had left their marks in his eyes and in the shape of his mouth. . . .[1]

The royal palm-trees stand in quietness,
Stately and motionless and beautiful
Against the tropic night.
Between the slim fronds of their drooping branches
Tremble the jewels of the Southern Cross
And gold Canopus; while from the brim
Of her bright, alabaster chalice Isis pours
A silver light upon the pale gray stems,
Tapering, ringed, like ancient-builded columns,
Thinking she stands again beside the Nile,
On Philæ's templed isle, at Elephantine,
Or in the lofty, immemorial hall
Of Karnak.[2]

Both strive for effect in style; but it is a style that gives no sign of reserve power. Goethe's lyric leaves out all detail but the silence and the spirit of peace. It has the economy of that ex-

[1] Thomas Boyd, "Our Top Sergeant," *Scribner's*, May, 1928.
[2] Irene H. Wilson, "Royal Palms," *Scribner's*, May, 1928.

quisite verse from Hebrew poetry, "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help." The scene of the battle of Waterloo is managed with the same rigid economy of detail and the same masterly knowledge of just what is needed. There is no crash of jarring syllables, no painting of the agony of terror. It is all suggested by the boldest of significant detail.

Imagery, as we shall see, and the conscious choice of figures, have their place; nor is that communication which uses them thereby confessing its weakness—far otherwise; the use or absence of figures will all depend upon the quality of the particular experience. One would not wish to subtract a single image from Keats' *Last Sonnet,* though more than half of the poem is an extended simile. And this stanza from the *Ode to a Nightingale* has an elaborateness which in a lesser poet might have been artificial, but here is fused perfectly into the pervading attitude.

> Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
> No hungry generations tread thee down;
> The voice I hear this passing night was heard
> In ancient days by emperor and clown:
> Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
> Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
> She stood in tears amid the alien corn;
> The same that oft-times hath
> Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
> Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

Nor does the apparent triviality of the details, their commonplaceness, as they are communicated, detract from their value if their total effect is not trivial or commonplace. Baudelaire has written in his *Journal,* "in certain states of mind, which seem almost supernatural, the depths of life stand revealed to your eyes in their entirety in an incident it may be of utter commonplaceness, which then becomes their symbol."

In the use of the commonplace there is no difference between the practice of the poet of the brief lyric and that of the more ambitious writer of novels. Goethe makes his *Wanderer's*

Night Song out of a silent mountain range and a silent wood. Flaubert in his *Madame Bovary,* Fielding in his *Tom Jones,* Tolstoy in almost the whole of his *War and Peace,* have dealt equally generously with the commonplace; and like an architect who can find for his use only ordinary bricks, each has constructed a palace. It is not the materials that show the art, but the compelling motive that assembles them and assigns to each its peculiar function, so that there shall be no discrepancy between the artist's vital attitude and the completed communication. This is what we may call *style.* The "magic of style is creative," wrote Matthew Arnold, "its possessor himself creates, and he inspires and enables his reader in some sort to create after him. And creation gives the sense of life and joy: hence its extraordinary value."

All this, however, though we may most devoutly admit it to be true, is yet a bit vague. It should be our first task to form a fairly definite notion as to what style means—this word that from Aristotle to the latest critic has caused rhetoricians and critics a thousand perplexities and headaches. To be in the tradition, one should be willing to accept its pains and penalties.

Perhaps the most irritatingly difficult attitude toward style to attempt to discuss, is that of the modern expressionists, who have exaggerated the doctrine of Croce. To them, in the words of one of the disciples, "the theory of styles has no longer a real place in modern thought: we have learned that it is no less impossible to study style as separate from the work of art than to study the comic as separate from the work of the comic artist. . . . Romantic criticism first enunciated the principle that art has no aim except expression; that its aim is complete when expression is complete."[1] The trouble with this is that it is more than half true; but in that fragment of error that so winsomely invades the argument, there lies a complete misconception of the nature and value of art. For the purpose of art is not only "expression" but

[1] Spingarn, *Creative Criticism.* To the expressionist, I repeat, the work of art is complete when it is expressed, *i.e.,* intuited. Expression is purely a mental and internal act. The communication is its externalization, and relatively negligible so far as the value of the work under question is concerned.

also communication; an art that communicates only indifferently, no matter how valuable it may be to the artist, can be only indifferent art. Nor have we any clue to the work of art except this external symbol. Further, style has something very intimate also to do with the matter of communication, and hence is of the utmost significance to the critic who is seeking primarily for the value of the experience communicated. To the critic, therefore, the question of the style of an author, not styles in the abstract (for the expressionist was not the first to discover that there is no such thing as an abstraction in the world of criticism), is a question of a high importance.

Nevertheless, the modern expressionist has done a very real service in calling attention to the fact that style is a thing peculiarly intimate and concerned with the author and his work. Something like a century and a half ago—in an age when dogmatic criticism flourished, the variety of criticism so abhorred by the new school—the French scientist, Buffon, said much the same thing in a definition that is yet quoted with much praise: *"Le style est l'homme même."* It is molded, if we may use the figure, by the very texture of the author's experience, but it is objectively also the manner in which he translates the experience into symbols. The same thing was said more than a century earlier by Pascal: "When you meet a natural style you are struck with delight, for you expected to find an author and you see a man." Thus Flaubert is quite right when he says, "it is a way of looking at experience" (*"c'est une manière de voir"*), and that it is "the soul which gives the words their being." Or, as he says in another place, *"Tout déroule de la conception."* This runs parallel to De Quincey's definition of style as an incarnation of thought. But it is also the thing which in turn gives soul to the reader's experience, like an interpreter bridging the otherwise unutterable gap between the reader and the writer. And if it is only an indifferent interpretation it may succeed only in stirring the reader's mind into perplexity. In that case, if we call it style, we shall have to add something of a qualifying reserva-

tion. But Ben Jonson said all this three centuries ago: "In all we call speech, words, and sense are as the body and soul."

I am afraid we shall have to give up as not very helpful the famous definition given by Schopenhauer, "Style is the physiognomy of the mind, and a safer index to character than the thought." The first half of this saying is not so difficult to decipher perhaps, though it includes more than the matter with which we are directly concerned. The last half is frankly a riddle.[1] Similarly I do not think we need to pause long over Spencer's famous definition of style as "economy" in expression. An uneconomical poet as, for example, Swinburne at times, would then have no style. And though one may not approve of all that Swinburne expressed, one would hardly be justified in charging him, or any other garrulous poet, with lack of style.

It may be necessary to give up any effort to so define this much battled-over term as to include only such style as may be called "literary," and accept frankly the implied definition in Tolstoy's *What Is Art,* that style is the manner in which an author, good or bad, uses his symbols. A good style, then, is not necessarily one which is "clear without being mean," as Aristotle would have it, but one which is adequate for communication; and its specific quality will depend upon the specific quality of the experience to be communicated. The highest achievement in style, the "magic of style" as Matthew Arnold has it, is to symbolize adequately a notable experience; and this, as I take it, is what Aristotle had in mind. From this point of view one can accept cheerfully the exquisitely neat little definition given by Stendhal: "Style is to bring to a given theme all the details appropriate to produce all the effects proper to the theme."

It is precisely for this reason that careful writers, like the conscientious Flaubert, labor painfully for precise communication. With a distinct feeling for the shade of the particular detail in his own experiences, it becomes for a careful writer a matter of the utmost significance that the symbol be found, the figure, or

[1] A little better is August Boeckh paraphrasing Schopenhauer. "He who has no character has also no genuine style"; and he adds that lack of freedom, both external and internal, will destroy style.

the image, or the word or phrase, that will rouse the precise response in the reader. It is also for this reason that Pater quotes approvingly the words of Flaubert's commentator: "Among all the expressions in the world, all forms and terms of expression, there is but *one*—one form, one note—to express what I want to say."

Naturally, then, an author who must have, by his very personality, *"une manière de voir,"* will tend to have a style that is more or less immediately recognizable. It is the way in which he uses the symbols for the purpose of communication. Thus it cannot be more than a reflection of an author's personality, though it may be much less. For example, to one who knows Thackeray, or Shakespeare, or Goethe, or Montaigne, it does not take a long passage of an unread fragment to recognize the hand of the master, just as one knows at once the voice of a friend in the next room. For the same reason, we are perhaps justified in saying that a person who writes awkwardly, or vaguely, has no style, though it would be more accurate to qualify the saying by adding that he was lacking in the virtue of precise communication. Finally, we are likewise permitted to speak loosely of a specially effective piece of writing, a splendid piece of imagery or an intensely dramatic episode, as having style, for the communication here is adequate, and perfect adequacy is the very "magic of style" which "gives the sense of life and joy" of great literature; and is "clear without being mean."

It is easy now, I suspect, to pass judgment on that vagary of fine writing which seeks its effects by style for style's sake. At its very worst it is like an orchestra that consists only of drums and cymbals—rhythm with nothing for the rhythm to carry. A pounding pulpit orator, or a screaming platform spellbinder, is something of the same pestilent irritation. We can dismiss them as Dante does the souls of those fit neither for Heaven nor Hell: *"Non ragioniam di lor, ma guarda e passa."* Sometimes its very artificiality has in it something which seems to commend it, for the author has strained ingenuity to load it with charm. Again it is appropriate to quote Pascal: "It is not enough that a thing

have charm, it is necessary also that it be proper to the subject that it neither offer too much, nor have something lacking." The style commonly known as Euphuism is an excellent illustration of this vice, which by no means died with the end of the sixteenth century. It is a thing of constant recurrence, an effort to cover the poverty of experience by an elegant mantle of phrase. There are traces of it in the early poetry of Keats. Tennyson indulged occasionally in his youth in similar debauches of imagery.

Most serious is the fault, and most insidious, when the author for one reason or other has lost the original stimulus of his earlier method, and falls back upon the mannerisms of his success to bolster up his later weakness—even sometimes exaggerating them. This will be especially true in an author who feels himself compelled to write even after his vein of ore has been partly exhausted, or when he is fatigued. One catches it frequently in the later work of Dickens. As Murry points out, one has no difficulty in seeing it in the later work of Henry James. It jars rudely in the uneven work of Whitman, who never seemed to know when he was working under a real inspiration and when his singular and effective mannerism was the power that moved his lines. At times it is apparent in the later plays of Shakespeare, notably *Cymbeline,* where style at times becomes almost mannerism. We might in this connection call this descent "the last infirmity of noble minds."

The question of style, as it has been defined, will also in part determine whether the symbols chosen shall be in prose or in poetry. The difference between these two methods of communication has been made a subject of critical inquiry since the days of Aristotle; and the philosopher-critic did posterity a good service when he pointed out that an essentially prosaic subject, like medicine or law or philosophy, though put into verse for mnemonic motives, was not thereby elevated into the realm of poetry. He might have added that for the same reason an essentially poetic subject, though communicated in prose, does not thereby lose caste. From the very beginnings of time there have been misalliances in the *genres* of literature.

In the first sentence of the preceding paragraph I purposely used the phrase "in part." For it will be readily acknowledged that there are certain large literary appetites, or fashions, in each age that will determine in advance that certain modes of communication will be more popular, and that if an author elects one of the less favored he will to that extent forfeit the spontaneous favor of the public. The seventeenth century in France, for example, the Age of Molière and Racine, was an age that favored poetry, and we find even Molière writing comedies in verse, when already the Italian comedy of the century before had largely abandoned it for prose. At the same time, for longer narratives there was no symbol held in quite such honor as the verse of the epic. Shakespeare's England favored the poetic drama, and Shakespeare was able to reach every level of the audience from noble to apprentice with the poetic lines of *Hamlet* and *Lear*—a feat not a little difficult today. Today, on the other hand, is the age of the prose novel; and a poet, no matter what his skill, is compelled to overcome the weight of an unconscious prejudice before he can make the value of his poetry felt even by the best disposed. Were Shakespeare living today, and were his genius not drawn off into other and more materially remunerative channels, it is possible that he would be not the poetic dramatist but the novelist. And who can say that the plays *Hamlet* and *Othello,* which have puzzled countless heads, might not have been more successfully communicated as novels?

For the communication, then, of an experience, which is more complex and requires a larger canvas than a personal lyric, the writer has the choice of either poetry or prose, and his selection will be in part at least dependent upon the taste of his age. But when he has selected his mode of communication, and has determined upon either poetry or prose, his manner of procedure will be forced to be appropriate to his selection. For though both poetry and prose are symbols for experience, they go about their task in quite different ways. It is easy to see this in a multitude of examples. Scott's *Lady of the Lake* and his *Rob Roy* are somewhat similar in theme; and yet a comparison of an episode of the

one with an episode of the other will show that the poet and the writer of prose are two essentially different individuals.

It is obvious also that a personal lyric, the value of which is chiefly emotive, would languish if translated into prose. The rhythm, the meter, and even the rhyme are an almost unescapable means for the stimulation and control of the reader's experience. And the peculiar use of imagery, under which the lyric thrives, would bewilder and befog a passage in literal prose. There is an obvious distinction between these two manners of communication. It will be interesting to explore the difference.

J. Middleton Murry has one startling statement about prose and poetry—startling because it is nearly true—that nearly all of the greatest literature, barring the purely personal lyric, might have been written either in prose or poetry. It is quite conceivable, for example, that Dante might have been able to write the *Divine Comedy* in prose, or Shakespeare, as we have said, might have made a novel out of *Hamlet*.[1] But the essential thing here is that in either case the poem would have become a different thing and its final effectiveness problematical. Or, on the other hand, Hardy might have made a poem out of *Tess*—he had the power—but would it have been so valuable as the novel? These are idle questions. It is better to remain on safer ground.

In pure prose the aim of the writer is to make the thing he is writing about correspond with objective fact or reality. He is not in the least concerned with the emotive value to him of the experience or the thought. For example, if he is a witness in a trial he is asked to relate with such precision as he can the exact details of his knowledge, and every effort is made to strain off every possible personal opinion or attitude toward the experience. That he might be able to give his testimony in rhyme would not alter the fact that he speaks in pure prose. Similarly, books of travel or biography, history, and science, which aim chiefly to convey information, and that in a precise manner, and with little

[1] By this it is obvious, I hope, that what is meant is not a prose version of the *Divine Comedy* or *Hamlet*, but a new communication which by the methods of prose would have been able to communicate the poet's mental attitude.

or no personal color or attitude toward the subject, are in easily recognizable prose.

But the external world, the world with which he is attempting to remain consistent, may exist only in the writer's imagination—for example, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*—and the writer may by the most painful use of convincing detail build up an edifice of sheer fiction, which however has the power of imposing upon us even more successfully than the best authenticated accounts of actuality in the daily press. Indeed, to many the final knowledge that there was no such person as Robinson Crusoe, that Defoe had never seen the island, and that the story of Selkirk which gave Defoe his vague hint, was utterly different from the story of the novel, comes as a very real shock. Similarly, a more pretentious novel, like Galsworthy's *Forsyte Saga,* describes in detail the background and the life, inner and outer, of three generations of English middle-class society, men and women wholly fictitious, but in its picture of what might have occurred it makes fiction more convincing than fact. The successful novelist, in Aristotle's phrase, follows the principle of the "probable or the necessary" in developing his situations and painting his characters. This is no more than to say that he follows life as his model, exhibiting it purged of irrelevancies and irrational incident and giving it a coherent pattern. The relation between characters and events, the management of plot, thus impress the reader as a more convincing, or probable, or necessary exhibition of objective fact than the ordinary business of life itself. And all writers of fiction, from the simple realist like Defoe to the most complex, are interested in the effort to make the communication correspond precisely with a convincing external object, though at the same time this object has been created purely in response to the author's attitude toward life; and from it alone derives its convincing power. Yet this communication, too, would seem essentially to be in the realm of prose.

Let us pass, however, to a work like Dante's *Divine Comedy.* Here again is an effort to communicate by means of a series of pictures of an external world that is purely of the author's imagi-

native creation in response to his attitude toward life. But there is a vast difference in the effect which this communication has upon the reader. One is at once impressed with the fact that the imagination of the poet is working with largely different materials, and toward a totally different end. The difference does not lie, as the old orthodox attitude had it, in the fact that poetry is the realm of the fantasy and prose of logical thought—this difference obtains only in the more obvious forms of both. Nor is it quite true that in poetry the emotive side of the experience has the larger importance and in prose the intellectual, though again this difference obtains in obvious forms of both. But in poetry such as this, there is the larger scope to the imagination, which rises above the significance of objective fact for its own sake, and communicates an experience, inner or outer, lyrical or narrative, in which the value is more directly emotional and objective fact is introduced only in so far as it has emotional value. Thus it is the tone or color of the experience and not alone the precision of its objective character that distinguishes Dante's poem. For this reason also, the poetry seeks a diction and imagery that stimulates an appropriate response. This does not mean that there is an absence of emotive power even in Defoe—far from it; but the variety of symbols he uses in the course of his communication is valuable chiefly for their downright reference to the objective fact. For Dante they are valuable chiefly for their emotive effect, and the correspondence with objective fact is none too precise, and at times even blurred. It is not the objective value of the panorama of Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven that is the real experience, but the emotive, the inner experience of these regions. For example, there are no precise details in this magnificent picture of the wrathful:

> Son, now thou viewest
> The souls of those whom anger overcame;
> And, too, I will that thou believe this truth,
> That 'neath the water there are some who sigh,

Making the water bubble at the top;
As the eye tells thee, whereso'er it turn.
Fixed in the slime they say: "Sullen were we
In the sweet air that's gladdened by the sun,
Having within our hearts the smoke of sloth;
Now we are sullen in the swarthy mire." [1]

This is poetry.

Similarly, great tragedy, like that of Shakespeare or Sophocles, must be poetry, for tragedy is an emotive experience, a conflict and reconciliation of the most potent of impulses,[2] and the exhibition of great personality in conflict with overwhelming power. But when it turns, as in modern naturalism, to depicting the degradation of a suppressed class, or a social problem, as in Gorky or Ibsen, it turns from poetry to prose. Milton is poetry, for his is an emotive vision of a cosmic tragedy. Homer is poetry, for though his pictures are startlingly vivid, their vividness is emotive, and not precise in their correspondence with a supposed objective reality. One might illustrate by a passage selected almost at random. Its poetic power is obvious even in a translation.

There is the land and the city of the Cimmerians, shrouded in mist and cloud, and never does the shining sun look down on them with his rays, neither when he climbs up the starry heavens, nor when again he turns earthward from the firmament, but deadly night is outspread over miserable mortals.[3]

The difference between poetry and prose is not quite so simple or definite as at first we might be tempted to imagine. When M. Jourdain in *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* discovered to his amazement that he talked prose, he really made a discovery that

[1] *Inferno*, vii, 115-124, Johnson translation. The translation blunts the fine poetic edge of the Italian. I should like here to register my protest against the common assumption that Dante's descriptions appeal chiefly to the visual sense. He is impossible to *picture* adequately. His visible images are never clear, in spite of the apparently precise details. Try, for example, to *see* Satan. He becomes "grotesque" if looked at too narrowly. (Selection reprinted by permission of the Yale University Press.)

[2] See Chapter XII.

[3] *Odyssey*, XI, 5-19, Butcher and Lang translation. Reprinted by permission of The Macmillan Company.

requires more ingenuity than many are capable of; for poetry, or at least poetic utterance, is not so foreign even to the least of us as we imagine. For our impassioned utterance invariably strives to be poetic, though it rarely rises to the height of poetry. But we speak prose, plain downright prose, when we desire to be precise and objective. There are times even in the plainest of prose when the communication is tinged with poetry, as there are times when the highest of poetry drops into the objective precision of prose. There are passages that are largely poetic in Hardy, in Tolstoy, and even in Balzac. And there are passages of prose in Dante, for example in the eleventh book of the Inferno, and in many of the argumentative dialogues in both of the supernal regions. As a brief generalization, I believe it is safe to say that prose is interested chiefly in discovering the logical relationships of the communicated experience; poetry, on the other hand, is chiefly interested in creating a state of mind.[1]

Poetry and prose seem at times to overlap, and we are quite unable to pronounce a sure judgment as to which a certain passage belongs. De Quincey's *Mail Coach* and his *Opium Eater* start out as manifest prose, but in the *Dream Fugue* and the *Pains of Opium,* we have passages that are essentially poetic, both in rhythm and imagery as well as in emotive significance. Carlyle thunders a thousand times into sheer poetic declamation. Chateaubriand in his *Atala* and *René,* as well as his *Memoirs,* often forgets his prose. Even Flaubert, in spite of his meticulous care for prose effects, frequently gives us a passage that is purely poetic.[2]

Prose, then, is adapted to precise reference to the fancied or real object, inner or outer. Poetry is adapted to the communication of something that has a larger emotive value. Prose is

[1] The bearing of this on the argument of Poe in his valuable little paper on the *Poetic Principle* I believe is obvious. But it is clear, I hope, that his reason for the impossibility of a long poem is inadequate. There *are* long poems.

It will be noticed, too, I hope, that I have carefully distinguished between the terms *poetry* and *poetic.* The latter might be said to describe a tendency toward emotive utterance, which becomes poetry when it is adequate and complete.

[2] Aristotle in the *Rhetoric* struggles with the distinction between prose and poetry. Early prose, he asserts, followed the manner of poetry. "It was because the poets were thought, despite the simplicity of their sentiments, to have acquired their reputations by their style, that prose style assumed at first a poetic form." Again, "the theme of a prose composition is less elevated."

demanded when one wishes exact or abstract thinking, definition; it is the only method of communication when one desires to record his real or fancied observations of fact and his conclusions based on these observations whether one is writing a scientific treatise or a novel. But the moment one is more interested in the emotive value of the object observed, be it a flower or a personality or an event, or an abstract idea like death or heaven, or even an abstract thought, one tends to pass from prose toward poetry.[1] To be more exact, perhaps, poetry is able more readily to communicate a complete state of mind with its emotional and intellectual values more adequately fused.

Prose, too, is slower in gaining its effect than poetry. A single phrase of poetry will at times suggest a complete attitude, and a short poem, like one of Milton's, can give a complete philosophy of life. Prose, on the other hand, must add detail to detail, for though its interest is chiefly in the object, it must, as it were, complete the picture before it can hope to be successful. It would take Milton a long dissertation in prose to say the same thing that he put into the fourteen lines of his sonnet on his blindness.

Yet one must not forget that the emotive value of prose, through cumulative effect of details, can be very high, at times almost as high as poetry. For example, there are scenes in Hardy's *Return of the Native* scarcely less moving than some scenes in Shakespeare. The reason, I believe, is not far to seek. Objective details have certain very definite emotive powers, if adequately employed, and in such cases precision of reference to them will take the place of the value of poetic imagery. Only, and for obvious reasons, it will take more of these bits of life to bring about the totality of effect desired by the writer.

This fact will also explain in a large measure why this age finds prose more congenial than poetry. For our large acquaintance with the objective interest of science has enormously enriched our knowledge of the life about us and given life and nature

[1] See on this subject the interesting discussion in J. Middleton Murry's *Problem of Style.*

a new set of values. In this life, with its infinite details and our desire for accuracy in their delineation, we are open to emotive experiences such as were never known before. It is not to be wondered at, then, that poetry with its more direct appeal finds today many deaf ears. But there need be no real critical discomfort at the thought that in general the beginning of the twentieth century prefers to get its emotive experience from prose rather than from poetry. Only it will have to read more—and this is what it is most obviously doing. It is an interesting speculation whether poetry will ever win back its old and orthodox prestige.[1]

A clear distinction might be made here, in passing, between poetry and a poem. Any single flash of emotive utterance that is adequate, though it may be buried in a context of sheer prose, is poetry. A fine example may be found in the first chapter of Job, in the Bible. The chapter is excellent narrative prose, simple and direct, but there is in it one lightning flash of pure poetry. The story has been describing how Job was shorn of all his possessions, and how he bore the loss in silence until he heard of the death of all his children. Then in his overwhelming grief he broke forth:

> Naked came I out of my mother's womb,
> And naked shall I return thither:
> Yahweh gave and Yahweh hath taken away,
> Blessed be the name of Yahweh.

Poetry becomes a poem when it possesses the organic unity of a complete experience, when it has "form." There are many short poems, and there are long poems. The long it may be possible to subdivide into many short, each unique and complete in itself; but, and here the argument by Poe in the *Poetic Principle* is inadequate, the perfect fusion of the many short in the

[1] It is true, as Aristotle remarked in the *Rhetoric*, that early prose for heightened effect leaned heavily on poetry. But is it not also true that now, when prose is no longer in its infancy, poetry is borrowing some of the methods of prose? See Amy Lowell's defense of polyphonic prose.

long, and the perfectly achieved single attitude at the end, gives it a unique power and scope unknown except in such poetry.

There remains yet one more interesting question with regard to the problem of communication that should be taken up in this already overburdened chapter: the problem of the incommunicable. Aristotle has defined this as the monstrous, which he advises poets against attempting to picture. Yet monsters have always been—or at least until quite lately—a favorite theme of poetry. One is aghast at the many one finds in the poem of Spenser, monsters huge and grotesque who made the earth tremble, as well as knights and ladies as supernally impossible. For Elizabethan England found a delight in them, though our twentieth century seems to have renounced the monster of either variety and all his works. Yet as late as the last century Lewis Carroll was able to perpetrate his *Jabberwocky* and delight a public with its grotesque monstrosity. What is the secret of incommunicability? I believe the answer is exceedingly simple and is to be found in the symbols used to communicate it.

So long as people at least imaginatively could believe in monsters and similar eccentricities, symbols were available and could be found to express them. But when the power of "willing suspension of disbelief" in anything wanes, be it Devil or Jabberwock, there is no symbol, no matter what its former potency, that can call up the experience. This is nothing more than to say that the experience of the author must call upon the experience of the reader. And if there be nothing in the reader's imagination of a sort commensurate with the experience of the writer, the communication is doomed to failure. This will easily explain why Wordsworth's and Coleridge's poems that fascinate us today, fell upon deaf ears a century and a quarter ago.

But when we see bizarre efforts to communicate in a novel manner with novel symbols what is in reality an ordinary experience, as has been tried more than once by ambitious eccentrics, then the critic can have no fear in pronouncing sentence. The ordinary symbols of communication have served great genius

to express, and express successfully, the most unusual and the most valuable of experiences. Their pleasing naturalness and apparent absence of effort should be both a joy to the real artist and a *memento* to the wayward. What can be simpler than the romance of Paolo and Francesca in Dante, and yet what can be more adequate? So moved was the poet that he fell, *"come corpo morto cade."* Shakespeare is equally simple in his most effective passages. The highest ends can be reached by the simplest means; and this is one very great secret in style.

Chapter V

THE PROBLEM OF COMMUNICATION—IMAGERY

SEARCH FOR THE PRECISE SYMBOL—WORD-PATTERNS, NOT WORDS—RHYTHM—RHYTHM AND SOUND IMAGERY—PROSE RHYTHM—RHYTHM IN POETRY—METRICAL PERFECTION—METRICAL IRREGULARITY—IMPONDERABLE VARIATIONS—DANGERS—ALLUSION—VALUE OF ALLUSION—DANGERS OF ALLUSION—VALUE OF WORDS—POETIC DICTION AND PROSAIC—PURITY IN LANGUAGE—SLANG—WORD IMAGERY—*ut pictura poesis*—IMAGES OTHER THAN VISUAL—VALUE OF WORD IMAGERY—FIGURES OF SPEECH—THEIR VALUE—FALSE FIGURES—IMAGERY FOR IMAGERY'S SAKE.

"You are an artist. . . . You feel superbly, you are plastic; that is, when you describe a thing, you see and touch it with your hands. That is real writing." So wrote the Russian dramatist and novelist, Chekov, to Gorky. The thought here is not different from the famous advice given by Flaubert to de Maupassant: "When you pass in front of a grocer seated before his door, or a janitor smoking his pipe . . . show me this grocer and janitor, their pose, all their peculiarity of character, so that I will not confuse them with any other grocer or janitor." And precisely here is the problem of the writer, whether of prose or of poetry—to find the word, the phrase, the image, the appropriate symbol, that will cause the reader also to see and touch the thing described. And the power of the writer will be as his ability to find the exact symbol. Boileau was equally emphatic.

D' un mot mis en sa place ensigna le pouvoir.

Finding the word, in spite of Croce, is not a mechanical "externalization" of the inner experience governed only by "prac-

tical" considerations. But it is always a process, and sometimes a painful and slow one, of living over the experience while communicating it by the selection of adequate symbols which are as precise emotively and intellectually to the writer as later they are to be to the reader. The writer is not, as the theory of expressionism might lead one to expect, first the architect of his inner experiences, and then the practical mason and carpenter who "externalizes" the received design. Building a house, after the designer's work, is a purely mechanical problem. But putting together the details of the novel or poem or even essay, is something far different—and more difficult, else we had long before this known a guild of poets with union hours and a uniform scale of wages.

For we communicate in literature not abstract thoughts—here the problem is not difficult—not ideas alone, but states of mind, with all their varied elements, which at times are exceedingly complex. The symbol in consequence selected by the writer must be capable not only of rousing such a state of mind in the writer himself, but also of communicating a similar one to the reader. It is this "control" of the reader's state of mind that makes the selection of the exact symbol so painful and yet so pleasing a necessity. So intent was he in its search that it shortened the life of the author of *Salammbo*.

The result is that we do not speak in words which denote merely ideas, but in word combinations—in patterns, as it were —that yield their value only because they have become associated in the tradition of speech with many past experiences. We shall see in a moment when we come to discuss words, what all this implies. Hence it is that the search for the exact symbol—the word, for example—becomes so insistent. A false word, like a false note in a musical score, ruins the pattern of which it should be an organic member. For this reason Coleridge is again most consistently right when he defined as the "infallible test of a blameless style, its untranslatableness in words of the same language without injury to the meaning." It is only when we use

a foreign language with which we are imperfectly familiar that we are conscious of speaking or writing in words, and of expressing through them ideas, and painfully conscious also of an inability to give these color. In a language with which we are familiar we use rather, whether we speak, write, or read, a physical gesture into which many elements have entered, articulation, rhythm, pitch, so far as the voice is concerned, facial expression; and, if impassioned, the whole body is called upon to lend significance to the state of mind by appropriate symbolic action. The fact that in quiet reading or writing nearly all of these gestures are inhibited, and are purely imaginal, does not in the least detract from their value.

In beginning, then, the discussion of the various aspects of speech symbolism, it may be well to examine first the value of that which is most nearly universal, and which at the same time has least in it of the purely intellectual. Obviously I refer to rhythm. For though behind rhythm and often accompanying it, there is the symbolism of the more specific bodily gestures, facial expression, the movement of the arms and even of the whole body, their significance needs no more than be mentioned, except as they may be translated into the rhythm of poetry and prose and affect its character.

In this sense, rhythm is a species of imagery. It suggests to the ear certain regularly repeated movements of sound, just as words suggest by association certain visible objects, which have fairly predictable values to all who have had an essentially similar background of experience. In our use of imagery, and in discussions of its value, we are too apt to consider only the more obvious, that which has its appeal to the eye. But sometimes far more potent, because more deeply rooted in early race experience, are other varieties, those that are associated with the other senses; and among these none are more important, though far less definable, than those connected with hearing and movement. The rhythmic college yells are a case in point, and their predictable value in arousing in large and heterogeneous crowds simple and uniform emotions.

For example, take the refrain from the Chorus of frogs in Aristophanes' play. It has been adopted by a college for its yell.

Brek ek ek ex Koax Koax
Brek ek ek ex Koax Koax.

Put beside this the rhythmic effectiveness of this list of serpents from Milton's *Paradise Lost*:

Scorpion, and Asp, and Amphisbæna dire,
Cerastes horned, Hydrus, and Ellops drear.

One could use this as an incantation—it has horrid magic in its spell. There is something portentous in the rhythm in the first words of Hamlet's father's ghost:

I am thy father's spirit.

And the effectiveness of these words of Hamlet, as he catches sight of the ghost:

Angels and ministers of grace defend us!—
Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damn'd,
Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,
Be thy intents wicked or charitable.

In all of these the power resides in the rhythm far more than in any meaning the words have. One cannot fail as one reads these aloud to catch the rise and fall of the voice, or its monotonous intonation.

Rhythm here is not greatly different from music. It is not an ornament, nor a device merely to please or to lull the mind into a state of passivity. It is not something we receive, but a hint that rouses the mind by anticipation into a state of activity. It is a control of the emotion of the reader by aroused expectancy and its satisfaction, either by giving the expected beat or by introducing a variation which, though it cause surprise, yet also pleases because of its essential rightness. It thus sets up anticipatory reverberations, and if appropriate, is a means, and a valuable one, of "infecting" the reader's mind with the emotional activity of the author.

This magical quality of rhythm has nowhere been better described than by Coleridge. It is, as he puts it, "simply a stimulant of the attention." Its origin he traces "to the balance in the mind effected by that spontaneous effort which strives to hold in check the workings of passion." Its effect is that "it tends to increase the vivacity and susceptibility both of the general feeling and of the attention. This effect it produces by the continued excitement of surprise, and by the quick reciprocation of curiosity still gratified and still re-excited, which are too slight indeed to be at any one moment objects of distinct consciousness, and yet become considerable in their aggregate influence. As a medicated atmosphere, or as wine during animated conversation, they act powerfully, though themselves unnoticed." But it must not be relied upon too far; for "where correspondent food and appropriate matter are not provided for the attention and feelings thus roused, there must needs be a disappointment felt; like that of leaping in the dark from the last step of a staircase, when we had prepared our muscles for a leap of three or four."[1]

It must not be forgotten that there is rhythm in prose as well as in poetry, and that the more emotional prose becomes, the more it tends to accentuate the rhythm and approach the regular cadence of poetry. Only the rhythm of prose[2] is far more irregular, and at times far less obtrusive than the rhythm of poetry. Or to put it in another way, prose which aims to secure its effect by aggregation of ideas, by the intellectual processes of logic, has less need of a means to secure, as it were, a common state of mind for reader and writer by the appeal of rhythm. It is because of this fact, in part, that poetry is more rapid and direct in its response than prose.

An excellent example of prose rhythm may be seen in the extract quoted from Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* on page 74. For another of a quite different variety I give almost at random the following from Walter Pater. He is speaking of Leonardo da Vinci.

[1] Aristotle long before had anticipated this value of rhythm. He defines it in the *Rhetoric* as "the return of the similar cadence, so that readers anticipate it."

[2] See Saintsbury's book on Prose Rhythm.

Nature was "the true mistress of higher intelligence." He plunged, then, into the study of nature. And in doing this he followed the manner of the older students; he brooded over the hidden virtues of planets and crystals, the lines traced by the stars as they moved in the sky, over the correspondences which exist between the different orders of living things, through which, to eyes opened, they interpret each other; and for years he seemed to those about him as one listening to a voice, silent to other men.

The effect of this is like listening to a voice, an incantation in its musical rise and fall. There is no difficulty in analyzing it for its peculiar character. The first sentence prepares for the satisfactory second, which meets the expectation roused by the rising inflection of its predecessor. And the whole of the long third sentence is a series of challenges and the appropriate response; only each differs in a subtle way from its predecessor. There is in this the balanced or parallel structure so popular in Hebrew poetry.[1] It is this uniformity in variety that constitutes the charm of originality, and is the one thing inferior power cannot achieve. Further, an effort to find a substitute for any word in the series, or to drop even a syllable, will discover at once how organic the whole is, and how any variation or substitution instantly injures the total value.

In this, however, the effect of poetry is achieved by the means of what is ordinarily called prose. And there is a danger always lurking for the writer of imaginative prose, that he will more and more rely on his rhythm for effect, and thus let the sound of a musical cadence overshadow the sense. That this has been done repeatedly, even in great literature, has been abundantly proved. There are passages in De Quincey, in Sir Thomas Browne, and even in that hard-hitting pamphleteer, John Milton, where it is hard to choose between the majesty of the sound and the luxuriance of the associated imagery. To Murry, the *Areopagitica* is a celestial debate before archangels, a poem on the immortality of the soul; Sir Thomas Browne's *Urn Burial,* a

[1] The value of the antithesis is equally obvious. It introduces two paradoxical impulses, whose reconciliation is the pleasure of the sentence. Parallel structure piles up emotive effect by cumulation.

majestic elegy on the transitoriness of all human achievement. In lesser men this luxury of passion becomes an orgy of sound.

Take, for example, the magnificent oratorical richness in these two passages, the first from Milton, the other from De Quincey:

. . . For who knows not that Truth is strong, next to the Almighty; she needs no policies, nor stratagems, nor licensings to make her victorious, those are the shifts and the defences that error uses against her power: give her but room, and do not bind her when she sleeps, for then she speaks not true, as the old Proteus did, who spake oracles only when he was caught and bound, but then rather she turns herself into all shapes, except her own, and perhaps tunes her voice according to the time, as Micaiah did before Ahab, until she be adjured into her own likeness.

Lo, it is summer—almighty summer! The everlasting gates of life and summer are thrown open wide; and on the ocean, tranquil and verdant as a savannah, the unknown lady from the dreadful vision and I myself are floating—she upon a fairy pinnace, and I upon an English three-decker. Both of us are wooing gales of festal happiness within the domain of our common country, within that ancient watery park, within the pathless chase of ocean, where England takes her pleasure as a huntress through winter and summer, from the rising to the setting sun. Ah, what a wilderness of floral beauty was hidden, or was suddenly revealed, upon the tropic islands through which the pinnace moved! And upon her deck what a bevy of human flowers: young women how lovely, young men how noble, that were dancing together, and slowly drifting towards *us* amidst music and incense, amidst blossoms from forests and gorgeous corymbi from vintages, amidst natural carolling, and the echoes of sweet girlish laughter.

To get the full effect of these they must be read aloud. Yet even in reading to oneself one is conscious of the value of the rhythms of prose. Indeed, there seem to be rhythmic possibilities in some prose that can be caught only by the more subtle imaginal hearing of a trained silent reader. "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter." As prose gets farther and farther from the tradition of the spoken word, it will tend to cultivate a more and

more subtly refined rhythm. For prose, it must be remembered, is still in its youth, and has only very recently shaken off its tutelage to poetry.

In poetry, as we usually understand poetry, the rhythm tends to become more regular, and this we call meter. It was of this in particular that Coleridge was writing when he described the effects of rhythm. At times the musical character of meter is still more emphasized by the regular recurrence of similar sounds which we call rhyme.[1] It is precisely because the order is more regular that the effect of poetry in meter is more calculable, and the poet has a firmer control over his reader. Herein lies the essential difficulty with all novel meters or with "free verse." The more regular and familiar the meter, the more easy is it to secure the desired response; and for this reason "primitive" and easy poetry has always had a conventional and easily mastered metrical form; for example, the old English ballad. A more complicated meter, like the Spenserian stanza or the sonnet, is more "artificial," and requires a far more complex and difficult response. But in "free verse," where there is little regularity and almost an arbitrary complexity, the less supple reader is left perplexed and unconvinced. It was the tragedy of Walt Whitman that the "free" poetry that he wrote for a spontaneous and unsophisticated democracy, could be read with pleasure only by those whom he would have pilloried as artificial and sophisticated.

Never has sheer skill in versification been carried to a higher degree in English literature than in the management of the heroic couplet in the late seventeenth and the early eighteenth centuries. More care was given to its cultivation and more anxious thought to poetic periods than at any time in the history of letters, unless we except the age of Horace in Rome. The result was a poetry that, so far as the symbol and its metrics are concerned, was perfect. It is a truly edifying spectacle to watch the regimented beat of the systole and diastole of the lines of Pope, as

[1] The rhymes, assonance, or repetition of similar vowel sounds, and alliteration, or repetition of similar consonant sounds, mark the high spots, or crises, or turning points in the rhythm pattern. A case can here be made for unexpected variations in rhyme, bad rhymes, for the sake of surprise. But all this "mechanics" requires exceeding skill so as to avoid artificiality.

edifying as a parade of the British Life Guards, descendants both of much the same long tradition of aristocratic excellence. It is a pity that modern versifiers fail to take more seriously Horace's injunction concerning the labor of the file, *limæ labor,* and that they do not hold unpublished the poem that has not been ten times chastened into flawless perfection, *præsectum decies non castigavit ad unguem.*[1]

There is not a little of unmannered good health in the poems of many of our generation. It is a part of our horror of perfect excellence, perhaps; or an exuberant trust in the worth of our experience, and carelessness in manner of communication, a negligee undress, a mufti variety of style, full of good fellowship, and wanting a shade in the refinement of best taste. There is not a little of it in the poems of Masefield. I take again almost at random:[2]

> Quinquireme of Nineveh from distant Ophir,
> Rowing home to haven in sunny Palestine,
> With a cargo of ivory,
> And apes and peacocks,
> Sandalwood, cedarwood, and sweet white wine.
>
> Stately Spanish galleon coming from the Isthmus,
> Dipping through the Tropics by the palm-green shores,
> With a cargo of diamonds,
> Emeralds, amethysts,
> Topazes, and cinnamon, and gold moidores.
>
> Dirty British coaster with a salt-caked smokestack,
> Butting through the Channel in the mad March days,
> With a cargo of Tyne coal,
> Road-rails, pig-lead,
> Firewood, iron-ware, and cheap tin trays.

This is almost perfect; but in that "almost" Horace or any other classical critic would find the impossibility of a free enjoyment

[1] The subtleties of rhythm and meter are too great to be described by such terms as stress, length of foot or of syllables. The stresses are uneven, and length, varied. Then there is the utterly indescribable effects of pitch. In finding an appropriate manner of varying these lies the charm of good reading.

[2] "Cargoes," from *Poems,* vol. i, copyright, 1925, by The Macmillan Company.

of the verse. The metrical irregularities are not of a kind that produces "the continued excitement of surprise" and a gratification due to the anticipated surprise, but shock because of a slight disappointment. Amethysts and peacocks ought to be packed in better cases than pig-lead and firewood.

A great poem should show irregularities in its meter. Otherwise the mind is quickly cloyed by the regular metrical beat, and the poem becomes hypnotic in its effect—almost a meaningless incantation. In this fact will be found the weakness of amateur blank verse and rhymed couplets. Both are in effect too easy, but their very ease is their deadliness. If the mind gets only what it expects in the repeated rhythm, or the recurrent rhyme, it quickly recoils as a spoiled child tormented with too many expected toys. The skillful poet varies his meter, shifting the pauses, changing the variety of the feet, and even adding syllables for the sake of enriching the metrical pattern. But he does it in a manner that precisely corresponds with the varying and shifting stresses of the poetic experience; it never looks like carelessness. The old Greek epic hexameter admitted almost any variation in its spondees and dactyls. Milton never allows his blank verse to become monotonous. Shakespeare's blank verse shows marvelous suppleness to suit the needs of dramatic exposition of emotions and sentiments. And even a regular stanza, as in Keats' *The Eve of St. Agnes,* permits liberties to be taken with it in substitutions of trochee or anapæst for iambus.

The regular form for Milton's blank verse is easily described —ten syllables with the accent recurring on the even syllables.

Of mán's first dísobédience ánd the fruít.

It must be said in passing that no one reads the line in precisely this wooden manner, but the accents are a clue to the stresses in the rhythm. But notice how frequently he shifts the accents:

Régions of sorrow, doleful shades where peace.

A mind nót to be changed by Place or Time.

For one restraint, Lords of the World besides?

Illumine, what is low raise and support.

Beyond all past example and future.

Here we have examples of inversions all the way from the first foot to the last. In the same way, the cæsural pause, which generally occurs near the middle of the line, may be discovered anywhere, or there may be two pauses.[1]

But even more important than these measurable irregularities in meter, are the imponderable variations due to changes in the swiftness of the flow of the rhythm. The classic example of this is seen in Milton's two companion poems, *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*. They are two early exercises in metrics, exercises in the rhythmic flow of sounds—one swift and tripping, the other slow and dignified. But even more obvious is the utter appropriateness of each rhythmic gesture to the prevailing mood of the experience. Again, as a further illustration, contrast the last two stanzas of Keats' *La Belle Dame sans Merci,* and especially the corresponding lines,

With horrid warning gapèd wide—
Alone and palely loitering.

Metrically the two can be forced to correspond—but their similarity goes no further. They are experiences from two quite different worlds, and they have two quite different rhythmic patterns.[2]

By utilizing appropriate rhythm and meter, a poem may enlarge its imagery beyond the merely aural, and give us imagery also of action. It may not be easy, for example, in the second line quoted above, to fall into the slow pace of melancholic wandering. But in these lines from *Comus* there is distinctly something more than meets the ear:

[1] See Bridges' *Milton's Prosody,* where many other variations are accounted for.

[2] It is for this reason that one cannot be very patient with the effort to reduce all poetry to regular and wooden cadences by the so-called metrical standards of scansion.

We, that are of purer fire,
Imitate the starry Quire,
Who, in their nightly watchful spheres,
Lead in swift round the months and years.
The sounds and seas, with all their finny drove,
Now to the Moon in wavering morrice move;
And on the tawny sands and shelves
Trip the pert Fairies and the dapper Elves.

In reading this aloud, it is impossible to miss the gradually lengthening measure, as the scope of the dance becomes wider, and then the staccato effects, as the fairies and elves skip into the center of the ring.

Browning, in his *How They Brought the Good News,* gives the imagery of the galloping horses so successfully that even a callous reader must feel his muscles tense and relax in the moving rhythm.

Speed! echoed the wall to us galloping through;
Behind shut the postern, the lights sank to rest,
And into the midnight we galloped abreast.

But the lilt of a gallop was too fascinating and too easy to Browning,—he loved horsemanship—and at times he used the same rhythm, it might seem, inappropriately. The lament of *The Lost Leader* gallops with joyous abandon:

We shall march prospering,—not thro' his presence;
Songs may inspire us,—not from his lyre.

But one should be on one's guard. Rhythm is not onomatopœia. Even in poetry at times it can become too obtrusive and insist on playing the star, when of far more significance are other means of arousing the reader.[1] One is reminded of some of the excesses in rhythm of Swinburne, where the sound, the pure musical effect, surpasses the significance of other imagery and association. If this is true at times in poetry, one may without reserva-

[1] There is an obvious example of an overemphasis of the meter and rhythm in the so-called jingling meters. Excessive use of double rhymes and internal rhymes is a case in point. See Poe's *The Bells* and Hood's *Bridge of Sighs.* It is most appropriately done in Shelley's *The Cloud.*

tion again refer to its dangers in prose, where its metrical effects tend to defeat their own ends. Highly impassioned prose may sometimes achieve, momentarily, a very significant victory over a reader's emotion; it may be magnificent, but it is not prose. For the victory is not lasting.

But herein again lies an essential difference between poetry and prose. For communication requiring depth of imaginative experience, poetry is far more available and swift than prose. For by the means of rhythm and meter and rhyme the poet is able, as it were, to cut off the reader from the outside world and to confine him in the realm of the one experience. The very opportunity it offers of immediately throwing the reader into a state of heightened susceptibility to emotional suggestion, makes the poet much more an intimate to the heart of the reader than the writer of prose can ever hope to be. When heart speaks to heart the language will always be poetry.

But of greater value to both poetry and prose are the responses due to what in general we may call allusion. In a way, all communication is by the process of allusion to common past experiences. But it will be better to use the word in a more restricted sense. There is, of course, the common practice of allusion to mythology, history, or any other common fund of similar knowledge. For example, the following passage from Pater, which has been admired by many, is full of these open and half-veiled references to things known or fancied:

> Hers is the head upon which all "the ends of the world are come," and the eyelids are a little weary. It is a beauty wrought out from within upon the flesh, the deposit, little cell by cell, of strange thoughts and fantastic reveries and exquisite passions. Set it for a moment beside one of those white Greek goddesses or beautiful women of antiquity, and how would they be troubled by this beauty, into which the soul with all its maladies has passed! All the thoughts and experience of the world have etched and moulded there, in that which they have of power to refine and make expressive the outward form, the animalism of Greece, the lust of Rome, the mysticism of the middle ages with its spiritual ambition and imaginative loves, the return of

the Pagan world, the sins of the Borgias. She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her; and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants, and, as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and, as Saint Anne, the mother of Mary; and all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes, and lives only in the delicacy with which it has moulded the changing lineaments, and tinged the eyelids and the hands.

It would be an interesting task, and perhaps profitable, to touch the allusions here and to note their variety. The quotation—a favorite method of allusion—is not difficult to identify; and it plunges us into the next, the word weary, recalling at once Macbeth's, "I 'gin to be aweary of the sun," or the more famous Biblical phrase. So we proceed to references to Greece, Rome, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance. The passage has ransacked literature, history and mythology to furnish an adequate symbol for Leonardo's Mona Lisa. But behind this all is a larger allusion, one that is to the spirit of a work rather than to the letter of knowledge. Set this beside the closing paragraphs of Sir Thomas Browne's *Urn Burial,* and even the most callous reader can see a conscious or unconscious parallelism—not of specific imagery, but of rhythm and emotional context.

For the value of allusion is not that it gives the writer an opportunity to compliment the reader on a supposed wide acquaintance with things literary and historical—though this is nevertheless required of an adequate reader, and without it the value of the allusion is lost. An allusion for the sake of calling up curious niceties for the nice reader exposes only the poverty of the writer's experience, or his laziness, which he is trying to shield behind a technical display.[1] Nor is it done by the learned writer to display his own learning, as young readers are only too inclined to testify; and the practice of remote allusion has doubtless afforded critical

[1] As an example of skillful use of allusion merely as a technical display, I might refer the reader to Kipling's poem, *L'Envoi.* Better, but still gaining its chief power through allusion, is his *Recessional.* Note the lines:

"All of our pomp of yesterday
Is one with Nineveh and Tyre."

commentators abundant opportunities to get out learned annotated editions of such works. A writer, writing for his own age and a certain level of readers, like Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Goethe, usually does not require for his contemporaries annotated editions of his poem.[1] It is only as we get farther away from the poet that such explanations of allusions become necessary; and in this fact, I believe, can be discovered their specific value and danger.

The purpose of allusion is to add to the complexity of the particular experience the writer is communicating, by making available also the value of other experiences which are supposed to be recoverable by the reader. Suppose we strip from the passage from Pater the wealth of allusion and bring the thing down to pure prose—"Mona Lisa is the eternal feminine." But even into this I fear I have slipped a reference to Goethe's, *"das ewig Weibliche zieht uns hinan."* It is hard to speak of such things without allusion, for La Gioconda was to the English critic a symbol, not of a woman, but of a state of mind. And states of mind cannot be fully communicated except by the use of imagery. So here Pater catches and holds the tone by the rhythms of gentle melancholy, and against this background he rouses the activity of the reader's memory as he makes it respond to what " in the ways of a thousand years men had come to desire." It is not Pater alone, then, who is speaking, but all great ages of poetry, from Homer to our own day, that have known this desire, each adding its own reverberation of fear and longing for the unattainable woman.[2]

But, as I said a moment ago, we are prepared for allusion by previous experience and beliefs. For example, in this particular age, after the Great War, we are not a little impatient with poetry celebrating the pomp and pride and circumstance of glorious war.

[1] This is not quite true, on second thought. No reader, however competent, can have all contemporary matter available for allusion at his ready command. This fact becomes increasingly true in an age of rapid extension of knowledge. Shakespeare's allusion to the "still vexed Bermoothes" may have been based on common geographical curiosity. But today, with its extensions of available knowledge, allusion to recondite facts, though quite modern, calls for ever-increasing difficulty on the part of even a competent reader.

[2] It is only fair, I believe, to add that there are reasons for not going the whole way in admiration of this passage. The very fact that it is so full of remote allusion makes it a bit "suspect."

For whatever may be our individual beliefs regarding its necessity, we find it difficult to get the appropriate mental response to its romance. Even the *Iliad* today is rather more the melancholy tragedy of an unjust city and of a heroic prince, than the old thrill of manly enterprise it was to our ancestors. Most important of all are the parts played in all poetry by religious beliefs, or unbeliefs. Milton could not write his *Paradise Lost* today, for his constant allusion to a creed and a God, that today seem stiff with age, is all for the downright and confident seventeenth century, that knew a thing or two about the Lord of Hosts, and wore a sword on its thigh to do Him becoming service. And Wordsworth's poetry, with its constant allusions to Nature and the natural man, could have found no readers in the preceding century, for which Nature was only a thin ornamental fringe for the real life of the court and city. Only when we have somehow caught a glimpse of Nature as part of the divine plan can we have such poetry as *The Prelude*.

And in this day of realism down on all fours, and of science, with a tendency on the part of biology to replace the luxury of romance, it is hard for a reader who follows the new enthusiasms to feel the genuineness of the allusions of Pater in his adoration of Mona Lisa. The eternal feminine in this day of "pure fact" has somehow become lost in the tangle of the psychologist's nerves and neuroses—a new variety of Atalanta's web.

Allusion, then, is only a symbol for wider speech, speech in which the writer involves not only himself and the person spoken to, but also invisible speakers whose utterance is made to vibrate in the echoes of memory. It is a valuable, most valuable, aid to the sincere writer in vivid communication, such as Goethe refers to in the Second Part of *Faust*.

HELENA: How thus to speak so sweetly I would know?
FAUST: 'Tis easy, from the heart the words must flow;
And when with fond desire the bosom yearns,
We look and ask—
HELENA: Who with us burns—[1]

[1] Swanwick translation.

In all this matter of communication the problem finally is forced back to the question of the words, that is, to the value of the language employed. Before, however, we raise the question let us look carefully at the following three selections:

Today of past Regrets and Future Fears:
Ah, my Belovèd, fill the Cup that clears
To-morrow!—Why, To-morrow I may be
Myself with Yesterday's Sev'n thousand Years.

For some we loved, the loveliest and the best
That from his Vintage rolling Time hath prest,
Have drunk their Cup a Round or two before,
And one by one crept silently to rest.

Weep, O Judah!
Grieve, O Israel!
On thy heights are slain.
How are the mighty fallen.

Tell it not in Gath,
Publish it not in the streets of Ashkelon;
Lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice,
Lest the daughters of the uncircumcised triumph.

Ye mountains of Gilboa, let there be no dew nor rain upon you,
Neither fields of offerings:
For there the shield of the mighty was vilely cast away,
The shield of Saul, as of one not anointed with oil.

Not for these I raise
The song of thanks and praise;
But for those obstinate questionings
Of sense and outward things,
Fallings from us, vanishings;
Blank misgivings of a Creature
Moving about in worlds not realized,
High instincts before which our mortal Nature
Did tremble like a guilty thing surprised:

But for those first affections,
Those shadowy recollections,
Which, be they what they may,
Are yet the fountain-light of all our day,
Are yet a master-light of all our seeing;
Uphold us, cherish, and have power to make
Our noisy years seem moments in the being
Of the eternal Silence: truths that wake,
To perish never:
Which neither listlessness, nor mad endeavour,
Nor Man nor Boy,
Nor all that is at enmity with joy,
Can utterly abolish or destroy!
Hence in a season of calm weather
Though inland far we be,
Our souls have sight of that immortal sea
Which brought us hither,
Can in a moment travel thither,
And see the children sport upon the shore,
And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore.

Each of these is nearly perfect in its kind; and yet there is all the difference in the world between the kinds. It is poetry manifestly of a high order; and yet if we examine the three poems, word by word, there is nothing in any single word in any of the three poems that offers a hint of greatness. All are unusually simple, and show not the slightest merit as they stand alone. To study the poem thus by analysis of its final elements, is like an effort to see the secret of the beauty of the Venus of Milo in the microscopic secrets of the marble. Each of the words can be used in the most arid of scientific disquisition, and by itself fails to reveal the slightest hint of the potency it helps to create when woven into the texture of the poem.

The fact is that no word has any inherent poetic or imaginative value, save such as is attached to it when it becomes a part of a larger whole; and then it takes on the life of the organic pattern. And it will serve equally well—all other things being

equal—in prose or poetry. It becomes poetic diction when it has been combined with other words into the communication of an adequate poetic experience. It remains prosaic when it is utilized for the pedestrian purposes of communicating logical ideas. And we might here summarize by stating the two quite distinct uses of language—scientific and emotional. The one where the precise denotation of the object referred to is desired, abstracted from any large emotional context; the other, as in these poems, when the emotional experience accompanying the thought is of sufficient value to rouse the creative imagination into activity.

Naturally there are some exceptions, but they in reality serve to prove the rule. Archaic words are by their very nature poetic, we say, and truly, for they by association have become fixtures of poetry, and commonplace prose has no more use for them than a commonplace wardrobe for the doublet and hose of the days of Queen Bess. They are poetic, not because they are antique words, but because of their association with antique poetry. So again, certain archaic expressions and abbreviated words by long association have the flavor of romantic antiquity. Then further, certain striking words, not in common use, once having been given the accolade in great poetry, never seem to be able to forget their past grandeur, expressions like Macbeth's "multitudinous seas incarnidine," or Æschylus' ἀνήριθμον γέλασμα. These words have become monuments to great poetry, and we turn them to base uses at our peril.

Nor is a word, even of harsh sound or ugly implication, necessarily unavailable for poetry. Look at this from Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner:*

> The very deep did rot. O Christ,
> That ever this should be!
> Yea slimy things did crawl with legs
> Upon the slimy sea.

Nor are the long polysyllabic words more likely to be poetic than the short and homely. There is, of course, a certain rhyth-

mic quality about polysyllables, sometimes a euphony, that the short word lacks alone. But great poetry has turned the short words to use with the same facility as the long. Furthermore, as no word is found alone, in making rhythmic patterns the small words are as useful as the long. Indeed, it is not too much to say that the greatest poetry, like Shakespeare's at his highest moments, turns to the simplest of language. It is prose that finds a readier use for the longer words, because of their larger definiteness of reference.

It is possible now to find a definition for what we have learned to call "good taste" or "purity" in language. Everyone has at his disposal the current vocabulary, as everyone has access to what may pass as good manners. Within this he should find that which will serve as his most effective symbol. The whole problem is a relative one, and in this choice the speaker will show mastery of his technique, not by selecting a word that will suit merely him, but, unconsciously perhaps, yet most convincingly, finding in what suits him the very word that will best suit his reader. Again it is like good manners; it is not a formal code of inflexible rules, but such an adaptation of oneself to one's surroundings as will produce the least friction or awkwardness or misunderstanding. This is not quite equivalent to saying that there is no such thing as "good taste" or "purity" in language. But it does imply that there is no such thing as a word in the abstract. A word gets its significance only as it is used in a context, and the appropriate manner of its use is good taste and also purity.

It is Walter Pater who, of all English critics, has given the most thought and meticulous care to this matter of an author's vocabulary. For the writer who would also be an artist must be a "lover of words . . . opposing the constant degradation of language by those who use it carelessly." He must against this tendency seek ever to restore to words their "finer edge," and dread "surplusage" as an athlete dreads excess. For the two chief vices of the ready writer are the easy acceptance of a word with

its finer significance blurred by unreflecting use, and the habit of seeking compensation for an inexact phrase by lengthy circumlocution. On the other hand, for the reader who suddenly comes upon a writer who has this nice sense of a word's fitness there is the delight of true discovery. It is no small part of the charm of Thackeray. It is an aristocratic refinement of language that is contagious.

It is possible now to glance for a moment at those potent waifs of our language that are the despair of the purist and of the schoolroom. I refer to slang, euphemisms, and the argot of every neighborhood. Their value is that they are not yet words, and they have the emotive associations of direct allusion or imagery. When they lose this emotive content they either become words or are lost by a painless death. When they are the words of a distinct profession or class in a community they are a separate language, or dialect. As such, they have a literary value, but only when used appropriately for what they are, just as would any allusion or any dialect, when it is in place.

They differ by the whole horizon from those exclamations of profanity and near profanity or those disinfected ejaculations used when all other modes of utterance fail us. These, too, have their value, for they are a means of translating into vocal action impulses roused which are too powerful to be inhibited. But even if they can be thus defended, they can become a *cliché* revealing the poverty of a person's responses. One wonders what persons afflicted with such narrow ranges of response might do in the presence of a serious experience. Such exclamations are vigorous and convincing when they impress us with their inevitableness; at all other times they are a confession of puerility. They may not shock us in this shock-proof age, but they should make us ashamed.

The chief value of a word in poetry and generous prose lies in its power, in its context, of evoking, along with its thought, a train of emotive responses. In a very large way this is due to its control over what we have called imagery.

It must be remembered, again, that it is not in the word itself that the imagery is discovered, but in the mind of the reader. Imagery is part of the imaginative response for which the word is the symbol. It is potent first in the experience of the writer, it must be roused in the mind of the reader, and between them is the word woven into the texture of the rhythmic phrase. Nor is the image itself of any particular value unless it rouses impulses of one sort or other in the mind that are colored by their appropriate emotions.

As I write I can see, on looking up, the large and sprawling branches of a willow tree, shading a corner of a garden lighted today by a blaze of peonies. An accurate description of this tree, though it may be concrete and satisfying in every detail as a picture, would mean little. Pure fidelity to concrete fact and a lavish transcription of detail, though it might seem to create a plastic image, would hardly be of any value, either to me or to any reader. It is only as the image evokes certain impulses and emotions, until it becomes a complete experience, not a mere picture, that it begins to display value. Thus, the imagery of the tree might become a symbol of the sprawling decrepitude of age, or of hospitality to aspiring childhood, or even of disheveled mediocrity, in any of which cases, if one had the genius, it might become a poem. The point is that pure "visual writing" for its own sake, *ut pictura poesis,* is not literature, nor even the handmaid to literature. Imagery is not being concrete. Poetry is not plastic in this sense, even though many centuries ago Simonides, according to Plutarch, did say that "Painting is dumb poetry, and poetry speaking painting."

In this connection it is well to recall a warning by Coleridge: "Images, however beautiful, however faithfully copied from nature, and as accurately represented in words, do not of themselves characterize the poet. They become proofs of original genius only so far as they are modified by a predominant passion, or associated thoughts or images awakened by that passion." Or again, "great poetry is creative rather than painting."

Nor must it be forgotten that the images roused may be of other senses than that of sight. Tennyson's,

> grove
> Of poplars with their noise of falling showers,

rouses the sense of hearing. There are several varieties of sense images in this:

> Come into the garden, Maud,
> For the black bat, night, has flown,
> Come into the garden, Maud,
> I am here at the gate alone;
> And the woodbine spices are wafted abroad,
> And the musk of the roses blown.

The two passages that follow, from Milton's *Paradise Lost* and from Keats' *Eve of St. Agnes,* carry still farther the catalogue of the senses.

> They fondly thinking to allay
> Their appetite with gust, instead of fruit
> Chewed bitter ashes, which the offended taste
> With spattering noise rejected. Oft they assayed,
> Hunger and thirst constraining; drugged as oft,
> With hatefulest disrelish writhed their jaws
> With soot and cinders filled.

> And still she slept an azure-lidded sleep,
> In blanched linen, smooth, and lavender'd,
> While he from forth the closet brought a heap
> Of candied apple, quince, and plums and gourd;
> With jellies soother than the creamy curd,
> And lucent syrops, tinct with cinnamon;
> Manna and dates, in argosy transferr'd
> From Fez; and spiced dainties, every one,
> From silken Samarcand to cedar'd Lebanon.

Even in the extensive use of imagery in a passage like the one below from Homer there is no picture, but a series of concrete im-

pulses associated with the images. The fact that it must here be given in translation blurs for us some of the most valuable.

> Even as when in heaven the stars about the bright moon shine clear to see, when the air is windless, and all the peaks appear and the tall headlands and glades, and from heaven breaketh open the infinite air, and all stars are seen, and the shepherd's heart is glad; even in like multitude between the ships and the streams of Xanthos appeared the watchfires that the Trojans kindled in front of Ilios. A thousand fires burned in the plain and by the side of each sate fifty in the gleam of blazing fire. And the horses champed white barley and spelt, and standing by their chariots waited for the throned Dawn.

Word images, then, are for the sake of varying and deepening the experience, or better, probing the depth of the experience, by rousing new impulses and emotions. They are not a means of giving a more "concrete reality" to the experiences nor an effort to make it more convincing by making it better correspond with objective fact. And though in some descriptions this last may be desired, the objective fact is valuable only for its imaginative significance; and its image, only that it may disclose this significance to the reader.

But the most common and obvious use of imagery concerns the so-called figures of speech—a theme in which, from the beginning, rhetoricians have loved to display their ingenuity. And the countless efforts to classify and define their variety has given critics many a bad quarter of an hour.

The trouble has been that in most cases the critics have been anxious to discover in the figure some design or artifice for the sake of ornament or other effectiveness, as though there were something essentially unnatural about its employment. Julius Cæsar Scaliger, in his monumental work that no one now can read, nearly four centuries ago set the standard for the classic approach. Figures were of value "to define the undefinable," that is, a means of speaking concretely about things that have only ideal existence. There is a trifle of truth in this; for it is true that we can speak of the Deity, for example, only in figurative

language; as when the poet speaks of Heaven as the throne of God, and of the earth as His footstool. Again, he adds, "A figure in its broadest sense is one thing described by another, or one variety of speech exchanged for a more common." [1] All this sent the hunt for the value of figures in the wrong direction, for it inevitably led classifiers to search for the secret of the figure in some form of expressed or implied similarity or dissimilarity.

To be sure, there is an expressed or implied similarity in the following, of which variety thousands can be discovered in an afternoon's reading:

> O my Luve's like a red, red rose
> That's newly sprung in June:
> O my Luve's like a melodie
> That's sweetly play'd in tune!

or in the comic satire of this:

> And like a lobster boiled, the Morn
> From black to red began to turn.

or in this half-whimsical description of a daisy:

> A little Cyclops, with one eye
> Staring to threaten and defy.

But what shall we say to such lines as these, where, though there may be a comparison implied, the author was certainly not thinking of any correspondence between two different varieties of things?

> The winds that will be howling at all hours,
> And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers.

or these?

> I strove with none, for none was worth my strife,
> Nature I loved and, next to nature Art:

[1] A free paraphrase of *"Figura est varietas in re aut oratione, a communi usu deflexa."*

I warmed both hands before the fire of life;
It sinks, and I am ready to depart.

or this challenge?

All that I know
Of a certain star
Is, it can throw
(Like an angled spar)
Now a dart of red,
Now a dart of blue;
Till my friends have said
They would fain see, too,
My star that dartles the red and the blue.

In this, from Keats' *Ode to Melancholy,* there are crowded figures, but not one that is a comparison, expressed or implied:

She dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die;
And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips
Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh,
Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips:
Ay, in the very temple of Delight
Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine,
Though seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue
Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine;
His soul shall taste the sadness of her might,
And be among her cloudy trophies hung.

Far nearer the truth it is to acknowledge with Coleridge that figures, like the word imagery, are the "natural language of impassioned feeling." They come because they are the only mode of communication adequate. They are not resemblances or dissimilarities but of the very texture of the experience itself. And communicated, they bring that "pleasurable confusion of thought from an unaccustomed train of words and images."

"Pleasurable confusion," for the pleasure consists in reconciling the impulses roused by the figure—which in a bold, paradoxical figure will be equally bold and paradoxical—with the other impulses in the experience. "Unaccustomed," for the more val-

uable figures always introduce images which at first glance are essentially dissimilar and even paradoxical. For example, in the first quotation above, from Burns, the simile is felt to be commonplace. It may not have been at one time, but today sweet flowers and sweet femininity are easily framed into one experience. On the other hand, in Wordsworth's *Lines to a Daisy,* the trifling flower and the terrible Cyclops have little in common, save the one eye; and the startling unnaturalness of the very figure is its strength. It is a whimsical exaggeration, but the mental process of accommodating a Cyclops on a daisy stem is worth the pleasurable effort.

The figures of speech are the crystallizations of experience about a significant detail. The poet has an accumulation of vivid sensuous experiences in memory from which he can draw upon demand for the full significance of any present experience. They are like the colors on a painter's palette which he looks over when about to add a touch of color to a spot on the canvas; only they are more, for in them lies the value of past experience which enters into the present, deepening and coloring the present and lending to it the variety and added values of the past—values for the poet as well as for the reader.[1]

Thus the figures are also symbols for communication, and are also an integral part of the communication—not an ornament or something arbitrary. They are "the unique expression of a writer's individual vision." In communicating he finds them as ready to his hand as any other of the elements of communication, and as inevitable. Indeed, all speech is more or less like some rock, the fossils of once living metaphors which through common use have lost their vitality and emotive significance. We "insult," or "obstruct," or "impede," forgetting quite that these words once—in the prehistoric past—were words of imagery. And not the least value of poetry is to restore to words this quality of unique imagery. For without poetry, language would lose its imaginative quality. It is part of our heritage of poetic utterance

[1] Not a little of the value of a figure is that it comes in, as it were, inadvertently, almost as an afterthought, like a by-product of the writer's genius; yet at the same time it is the very thing needed for the wholeness and depth of the experience.

that words in certain collocations mean something more than "meets the ear."[1]

It is idle, therefore, to attempt a classification of the various figures of speech,[2] for they all do the same thing, but in a unique way. A metaphor, a simile, a synecdoche, a trope, metonymy, a hyperbole, and the many others whose name is legion, work to arouse new impulses in the mind of the reader and the writer, new and unexpected, and the greater the unexpectedness—that is within the bounds of the normal imagination to compass—the more vivid the impulse, and the greater the value. It is idle, also, to try to examine figures too closely, for they do not reveal their power under the microscope.

It is possible now to find a rough test by which to detect futile or false imagery. One can never quite approve these two figures:

> Silently one by one, in the infinite meadows of heaven,
> Blossomed the lovely stars, the forget-me-nots of the angels.

and,

> What is so rare as a day in June
> . . . . . .
> Then heaven tries the earth if it be in tune;
> And over it softly her warm ear lays.

The impulses roused by forget-me-nots are pretty, but also petty. They hardly are convincing when set against stars or even angels. And the figure of a violinist's ear over the violin hardly pleases, especially if the ear be very large and very warm. Or this other:[3]

> Summer set lip to earth's bosom bare,
> And left the flush'd print in a poppy there;
> Like a yawn of fire from the grass it came,
> And the fanning wind puff'd it to flapping flame.

[1] In a figure like the epithet the experience with its final attitude is given in a word. The figure, "you fox," at once completes the mental process and leaves also a vivid attitude. In this sense some short figures are complete in themselves.

[2] This habit, begun early, has become the last infirmity of pure rhetoricians. I am told of a book that finds four hundred different varieties! I have not seen it and am not likely to.

[3] From Francis Thompson, "The Poppy," published by Charles Scribner's Sons.

With burnt mouth red like a lion's it drank
The blood of the sun as he slaughter'd sank,
And dipp'd its cup in the purpurate shine
When the eastern conduits ran with wine.

The imagery here is bold, but there is a warning one reads in Spenser: "Be Bold, be Bold, be not too Bold." The imagery of a figure of speech will succeed delightfully if it can be incorporated into the totality of the experience; but if it fails, there is an art of bathos, of "sinking" in literature.[1]

And it is precisely because the so-called Imagist poets of today have set such high store upon imagery for imagery's sake that the less cautious among them have more than once been guilty of the art of sinking. An image is for the experience, not the experience for the image. Let this little poem—I confess, to me it is one of the worst—be a sort of *Memento mori* to rash aspirants.[2]

The fog comes
on little cat feet.
It sits looking
over harbor and city
on silent haunches.
And then moves on.

[1] Similarly, a mixed metaphor (*sic*) will hurt if the contradictory elements in it rouse contradictory and mutually exclusive impulses. But if they do not, the figure, though perhaps logically indefensible, is effective and good, like Shakespeare's "take up arms against a sea of trouble." Any imagination can do more than this.

[2] "Fog," from *Chicago Poems* by Carl Sandburg, published by Henry Holt and Company.

Chapter VI

THE QUESTION OF VALUE

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE QUESTION—THE CENTRAL PROBLEM IN CRITICISM—THE NUMEROUS ANSWERS—THE DOGMATIC TRADITION—THE CLASSIC IDEAL—TASTE AND MORALS—THE IMPRESSIONIST REVOLT—THE FEAR OF SCIENCE—RELATIVITY OF TASTE—DISTRUST OF REASON—PLEASURE AS A STANDARD OF VALUE—THE EXPRESSIONIST COMPROMISE—TASTE A CREATIVE ACTIVITY—ART FOR ART'S SAKE—THE EXPRESSIONIST PARADOX—AN ATTEMPT AT A DEFINITION—LITERATURE AND LIFE—THE IDEA OF THE GOOD LIFE—THE VALUE OF LITERATURE—LITERATURE AND MORALS—TASTE AND JUDGMENT.

THERE is something almost grotesquely pathetic about the universal appetite for reading. It is the one habit painfully acquired in childhood, from whose clutches we are never loosed. There are some who see something sinister in this never to be satisfied craving. But sinister or auspicious, the reason for it ought to be fairly obvious. Hugo von Hofmannstahl describes it:

> They who snatch the books of science, and even of pseudo-science, even as those others who grasp after novels or newspapers or any printed rag, do so because they would not stand shivering in their nakedness under the stars. They yearn for what only the poet can give them when he throws over that nakedness the folds of his garment.

People read because they find some value in the exercise. The German critic and poet has perhaps expressed himself in a cynical moment; but what he says about literature applies almost with the same measure of truth to any or all of the arts. They are cultivated because they have some value.

It is also an indispensable value; for though we may not be

always conscious of the exact nature of our need, there is yet an essential rightness in the manner in which it expresses itself in the demand for literacy and a more generous education. Literature and art have a very vital connection with the matter of living.

Equally fallacious [writes Richard Mueller-Freienfels] is the widespread opinion that creative literature is a dispensable luxury or a diversion which, however praiseworthy, stands in opposition to life. Were literature nothing more than that, it would be difficult to understand why no people on earth has ever been able to dispense with it, and why men of the highest general endowment have dedicated themselves wholly to its pursuit. No, literature is deeply rooted and intertwined with life's totality and its fruits produce a seed that gives birth to new forces in the practical world.

What is the value of literature? We have had this question come up repeatedly in the course of the preceding chapters. As long ago as Plato, it was a recognized problem; and it was because he could find no other answer to the insistent question of the value of poetry, than the obvious one of pleasure, that in a burst of good puritan asceticism he drove all the poets out of his perfect state as corruptors of morals and inventors of travesties on life. But at the last he relented; Plato was a poet himself, one of the world's greatest; and he left posterity with a plea and a challenge:

And we may further grant to those of her defenders who are lovers of poetry and yet not poets the permission to speak in prose on her behalf; let them show not only that she is pleasant but also useful to States and to human life, and we will listen in a kindly spirit; for if this can be proved we shall surely be the gainers—I mean, if there is a use in poetry as well as a delight.

The challenge was to all lovers of poetry; and poets and critics have answered, in poetry and prose, trying to express the faith that was in them, that literature has a value, a value which even the stoutest defenders of a people's moral welfare cannot overlook. In fact, the whole history of criticism from this early day to our own has turned and returned to this question, as vital as

any to the problem of living. For here we have the central problem in literary criticism—the question of value.

And the answers, though they have been couched in a varied language, can be grouped into two general classes. There are, on the one hand, the Dogmatists, as they have come to be called, who, like Plato, take literature seriously as a training in citizenship and morals, and to whom the calling of poet and novelist should be a lofty and edifying one. To these there is a tradition in letters as in human life, and a belief that greatness in literature comes with a discovery of this tradition and in conformity to it. To them the value of a book or a poem is discoverable in some standard predictable and definable; and though this tradition of letters may change from age to age, it changes as does any other organic creature, to meet new conditions, but essentially still remains the same. There may, at times, seem to be new growths that for the moment appear to defy the time-honored tradition, but these quickly pass. Or, as it was described by Sainte-Beuve, one of the greatest and most studied of the nineteenth-century critics: "At each turn of a century it happens that parts of the recently established tradition, which looked secure, break down and are somehow lost, and thus show only more clearly in its solidity the rock and indestructible marble." This is the faith of the dogmatist—a belief that for value we must look outward to some standard, and that this is discoverable in the tradition of letters.

On the other hand, there are those who have been disillusioned by the many paradoxes and difficulties in the way of a search for external standards of value. They see clearly what seems obvious to anyone, that what is one man's meat is another's poison; and that from age to age there are new fashions and new modes of thought, and that what most people call tradition is in reality only an abstraction and of no real worth in gratifying genuine taste. They content themselves, therefore, with a far more humble answer to the insistent question, why people read and what is the value of letters; and though their answers take on many forms, they come back, in the main, to the one formula

—pleasure. Literature is a pleasant diversion; or if profitable, only so because it is pleasant and affords relief from the pressing and drab business of making a living and getting on with indifferent people.

It is vain, to this less zealous party, to hope for any external standard by which the worth of pleasure may be measured; and so there are as many varieties of value, or of lack of value, in any poem or novel as there are varieties of readers. All we can do when we read is to record our individual adventure in the book; it is idle to look farther for any ulterior motive. This at least is the attitude of what is often called Impressionism, or art for art's sake. And its method of criticism is perhaps best recorded in a single sentence by its brilliant disciple, Anatole France. "As I understand criticism, it is, like philosophy and history, a kind of novel for the use of discreet and curious minds. And every novel, rightly understood, is an autobiography. The good critic is he who relates the adventures of his soul among masterpieces."

The quarrel between dogmatist and impressionist is as old as the history of literature. And in the search for a theory of value for art and literature it will be necessary to explore the attitude of both more fully, so that we may know a little better what they are fighting for before we attempt to take sides.

Dogmatism, to repeat, begins by assuming that there is a very real and abiding thing we call tradition; that there is something permanent and fixed, in spite of all apparent changes; and that this final factor in human nature must be acknowledged as unchangeable by any one who would understand human progress. "We have unimpeachable witnesses, that there does exist deep in the human heart, buried under a diverse exterior, something permanent and eternally immutable." So writes Brunetière. Sainte-Beuve makes of the same tradition the chief motive for his love of the ancient classics—with him, as with many others, a very real love—and the reason for our constant readiness by these to judge of the vagaries and inconsistencies of the present. They are like the polar star, eternally fixed; these temporary

aberrations are like the magnetic needle, liable to be affected by circumstances, and rarely quite accurate at best. So he writes:

> Oh, I know, in this sudden vertigo which has afflicted the world and modern society, everything changes, everything is constantly growing and being transformed. Each day new talents and new forms; all the rules by which we were accustomed to judge even works of genius have played themselves out; astonishment has become a habit; and we proceed from monstrosity to monstrosity. The truth of yesterday is only part truth this morning, and tomorrow morning shall be quite out of date and left behind. Our habits, scarcely acquired, become over night too narrow and unyielding. Indeed, I have often thought, that, as the captain of a vessel threatened by the ice is incessantly occupied in breaking the solid circle which threatens to hold him, so we at all times should keep alert to break the clutch of the habit that is about to seize and hold us. Let us beware of crystallization, let us keep our minds living and fluid.
>
> But also let us not allow the present or the near future to hold us too close; or the pride and luxury of life to intoxicate. Let the past, there where it has for us models perfect and exemplary, never cease to be an object of devotion and understanding.

It was thus that Sainte-Beuve solved the problem of the past and the present; for only by a clear understanding of perfection could he avoid the pride and luxury and change of the present. This is the value to him of tradition.

For tradition, again according to Sainte-Beuve, is the embodiment of urbanity and reason, the crystallization of the best of race history; and by its protection alone is one saved from the fads and irrelevancies of the present. Fortified by tradition, the taste of the reader or critic is not a purely arbitrary thing, like a bee sucking honey out of every flower, nor is it always in search of a home. It fixes upon the good, and there it abides, for only there can it find value. It is a citizen, not a *"Juif errant,"* and of no mean city. "For the classic," writes Pater, "comes to us out of the cool and quiet of other times, as the measure of what a long experience has shown will at least never displease us."

Perhaps one can best find this ideal respect for tradition in the

criticism of the seventeenth century in France. For with Boileau, the best spokesman of the period, it identified itself with good sense, reason, good manners, breeding, the ideal of the *honnête homme,* as distinguished from the barbarian who is always at odds with his emotions and the sport of his imagination. We see it, looking somewhat cold and austere, to be sure, and aloof from the affairs of daily life, in his *L'Art Poétique:*

> Whate'er you write of pleasant or sublime,
> Always let sense accompany your rhyme.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Love reason then; and let whate'er you write
> Borrow from her its beauty, force, and light.[1]

It is only when so founded that poetry and literature are more than an errant interlude, and become a "criticism of life," and criticism becomes more than the account of personal adventure among books, and the critic more than an *"aimable causeur."*

For to Sainte-Beuve and all good dogmatic critics, not only is the critic a cheerful conversationalist, and his task that of an entertainer; but also there is in him something of *"la police des lettres."* And how can one play the police unless there be clearly communicable and well-established laws to maintain, and people's interests to be safeguarded?

What, then, is the good in literature? What is value? Sainte-Beuve finds for it five *pierres de touche,* touchstones which will distinguish the genuine from the spurious. These are: *taste,* a kind of mystical sixth sense, which like the magnet picks up the valuable ore; *reality,* or truth to life, not necessarily to the external object, but to human nature; *truth to tradition,* the bond of urbanity and reason that unites us to the past; *logic and consistency,* as against pure caprice; and last of all *truth to morality,* that is a spirit not subversive of the larger moral standards of society. Brunetière, a successor in the tradition of Sainte-Beuve, has modified these tests of value slightly, and it will not be amiss to record his findings. They likewise are five in number: *truth*

[1] Soames tr.

to reality, again, not to objective fact, but to human nature; a measure of *harmony* in the quality of the experience (this is a vague test at best, and we cannot much more than guess at his precise meaning), and of unity in architectural structure; *no confusion of genres*—and on this Brunetière with his love of classification is most explicit;[1] *perfection of technique,* or what we have learned to call style; and finally, as in Sainte-Beuve, consistency with the best traditions of *morality.*

This is a large order, as anyone can see, and in it are two or three items that particularly cry for adequate definition; and on the definition of these many a battle in critical theory is waged. It is certain that the word "taste" cannot allow itself to be dragged into an argument until it has been forced to stand and unfold itself. The word "morality" likewise is precisely one of the much abused words that have been compelled to carry far too much or too little on their shoulders. For it is obvious that there is no such thing as taste in the abstract, and that tastes of different people differ as do their temperaments and personalities. There is just enough truth in the old phrase, *chacun à son goût,* to make it perilous to use the word carelessly. Furthermore, if by morality we mean any fixed, or socially accepted, code of behavior, such as the Ten Commandments or a book of etiquette, certainly literature, or at least a large part of great literature, is at times distinctly immoral. There have always been, on the contrary, an able body of critics who, like Coleridge, have stoutly maintained that questions of taste were most intimately bound up with the question of morals. "When a mere stripling I had formed the opinion that true taste was virtue and that bad writing was bad feeling."

Even that prince of dogmatists, Brunetière, realized the hopeless slipperiness of taste as a final standard of value, if by taste we mean the pleasure one gets from a literary excursion. "We are the judges," he writes in his most orthodox book, "the sole judges possible, of our pleasure, but we are not of the quality of our pleasure; and the authority that pronounces judgment on this is found

[1] See Chapter XI, where this subject is taken up in detail.

outside of ourselves, because it came into being before we did and shall survive us." In other words, the final judge in taste is tradition. We may enjoy a book, but our enjoyment is edifying or devastating to our moral nature as it agrees or disagrees with this thing called tradition.

I am afraid that even with this last statement of the great critic all is not yet quite clear. For even the word tradition has about it something of an abstract air. We can tell what the tradition has been only if we agree upon the list of authors who may be permitted to come up for membership. Nor is this effort to discipline taste into morality yet quite clear as to just what the process implies. Let us glance for a moment at the creed of the impressionist to see if from him we can get any light.

To the impressionist, this whole search for such a thing as tradition is a glorified hunting of the Snark, a quest of an abstraction that exists only in the brain of zealous critics who are afraid to lend themselves unaided to the simple pleasure of reading a book. To him the art of criticism, in the words of Lemaître, is no more than "the art of enjoying books and of enriching and refining one's sensations by their aid." It is only the story of our tastes and fancies, "a spiritual adventure," and its fineness is the value of the adventure. Perhaps the whole attitude in its most refined sense has never been better stated than in the glowing paragraphs at the end of Walter Pater's *Renaissance:*

To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life. In a sense it might even be said that our failure is to form habits: for, after all, habit is relative to a stereotyped world, and meantime it is only the roughness of the eye that makes any two persons, things, situations, seem alike. While all melts under our feet, we may well grasp at any exquisite passion, or any contribution to knowledge that seems by a lifted horizon to set the spirit free for a moment, or any stirring of the senses, strange dyes, strange colours, and curious odours, or work of the artist's hands, or the face of one's friend. Not to discriminate every moment some passionate attitude in those about us, and in the very brilliancy of their gifts some tragic dividing of forces on their ways, is, on this

short day of frost and sun, to sleep before evening. With this sense of the splendour of our experience and of its awful brevity, gathering all we are into one desperate effort to see and touch, we shall hardly have time to make theories about the things we see and touch. What we have to do is to be for ever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions, never acquiescing in a facile orthodoxy of Comte, or of Hegel, or of our own.

"Never acquiescing in the facile orthodoxy" of any creed—this is the orthodoxy in the rebellion of this form of individualism. A creed is a tradition, a static convention which, though everyone may accept it, has no real existence except in the minds of facile credulity. Lemaître calls it *snobbism*—"snobs of novelty," who catch up each new tradition and hug it as their own special secret, and "snobs of habit," equally docile and complacent. Docility is the sign of the snob, of the type of mind that easily accepts the yoke of tradition and convention, and glories in its badge. At first sight there is much freshness and strength of purpose to admire in this new assertion of the value of independent judgment.

It is a revolt against creed, and especially the crushing creed of modern science,[1] that has for a half century seemed on the point of enticing into the laboratory of the new psychology and biology the free spirit of humanity, and reducing it finally to an impotent creature of glands and nerves, as hopelessly mechanized as the brute world of physical science. In this new form, impressionism is a fierce assertion of the freedom of the human spirit, and its right to enjoy the art that it has freely created. For the rigid orthodoxy of modern science it substitutes the utter relativity of the things of the spirit. Art and poetry and literature, and the human response to these, are things above science and tradition. In this spirit Anatole France writes almost with *naïveté:*

The things that touch us most intimately, which seem the most beautiful and most desirable, are precisely those which remain always vague for us and in part a mystery. Beauty, virtue, genius, these

[1] I hope it will be clear that I am not using this word in its ancient sense of organized knowledge. As used by the impressionist—Anatole France, for example—it refers to the new physical and biological sciences, and also to psychology and sociology.

always keep their secret. Neither the charm of Cleopatra nor the sweetness of Saint Francis of Assisi, will ever permit itself to be reduced to a formula. And if objects like these belong to science, it is to a science allied to art, a science instinctive, fluid, and always incomplete.

And as the free champion of *l'esprit humain,* we can have nothing but respect for this new spirit that challenges all the old and traditional values.

Nor can one find fault with the spirit of joy with which it plunges into the adventure of art and literature. The old criticism took itself too seriously. It was at times difficult to look behind the big spectacles and catch the twinkle in the eye of a Sainte-Beuve. Even Matthew Arnold is a bit too heavy with his doctrine that "poetry is a criticism of life" and is inclined at times to list as valuable poems only those that have some philosophical message. One can, if one is bent on finding in literature an external value, find oneself looking chiefly for homilies. The habit of searching for sermons in stones and books in the running brooks often leads one to forget that there are pleasures that are neither books nor sermons. Above all, if we must, like Brunetière, always be out, like the botanist, to classify everything we enjoy, we may in our search for *genres* forget the beautiful object we have in our hands. It was against precisely this ulterior purpose in criticism that Lemaître and Anatole France exclaimed again and again: "The simple art of enjoying a book," that is all there is to the art of criticism. "Love the book which pleases you without troubling yourself about classification and doctrines, and do not promise yourself that your impression of today will correspond to that of tomorrow."

And so criticism cuts its own throat. There are no standards; we cannot even be sure that our tastes will remain constant. I quote again from Anatole France and Lemaître. "All criticism, more or less, is its own dupe, the dupe of its theories and of its generalizations, which in turn carry the falsehood over to each and all of its particular judgments." In other words, we have no right to judge, for judgments are based on general ideas, and

general ideas come from the father of lies. Or again, "we are victims or dupes of habit and tradition," and any general admiration or unanimous consent "has no spontaneity, nor sense, nor value, nor character whatever." So far has the distrust of tradition and a belief in any external value in literature led these apostles of pure individualism. The critic has become, what Sainte-Beuve decried, only an *"aimable causeur."* And as for a "police of letters"—in a state of every man for himself, there can be no police, or all are police.

But we can go even a step farther; even the great whose position has been long fixed by tradition, often do not quite come up to specification. I am reminded of George Bernard Shaw's remark about Shakespeare a few years ago, that most people took him on trust, and secretly scattered their love elsewhere. And though Lemaître was firm enough himself in his affection for the masters in the French tradition—Montaigne, Rabelais, La Fontaine, and even Racine—he nevertheless could write condoningly of others whose taste was less disciplined:

> We discover that our most generous admirations have been imposed upon us; that the thing which gives the greatest pleasure, or does us the most good, is not always from works best known or consecrated by tradition, but a book less celebrated which speaks more intimately and goes far deeper. . . . But if every one confessed this, what disorder! What anarchy! A history of literature would no longer be possible, nor even conceivable, unless the multitude took some things *sur parole.*

The reason that impressionism carried its revolt against dogmatism so far as to cut the ground out from under even a history of literature should not be far to seek. It all arose from a distrust of the human reason. For reason, as the followers of the revolt conceived of reason, has no dealings except with abstractions. The only world where it is completely at home is the world of science, which again is only a structure of abstractions useful for the needs of the practical life,[1] and for the added purpose of making further discoveries of abstractions. But the world

[1] See Chapter X where this subject is treated more fully.

of concrete reality and of vital experience, the world of æsthetic enjoyment, the only world in which *l'esprit humain* finds itself truly at its ease, the reason cannot enter. So came the distrust of reason, a new anti-intellectualism which used reason even in discrediting it. In truth what these anti-intellectualists were guilty of was the common error of isolating the reason or intellect, and then blaming it for what it was not. But as with many other emotional combatants, the warmth of their declarations often hides the real points at issue.

In the place of reason as a standard they set up the obvious one of æsthetic pleasure. Art and literature and all vital activity, they assert, is not the work of the reason, but of the freely creative instinct, and the sign and gauge of this activity is the emotional response of pleasure. Thus, for value in any art as well as in literature we must look to the æsthetic barometer, the purely subjective thrill which its contemplation brings. This is as far as we can hope to go in search of a theory of values—so argue the impressionists.

But pleasure as a mental phenomenon will bear careful investigation. We have already in a previous chapter[1] had occasion to discuss its physiological origin. It is a sign of a successfully accomplished activity or an activity that is proceeding without obstruction or unexpected difficulties. As a mere sign, it is of the most fleeting character possible, and hence varies indefinitely with the same activity. It can have an important stimulating effect on the activity, and as such has an indirect value, if the activity has value. But not infrequently it will accompany other activities that may be entirely devastating in their nature, such as the pleasure that accompanies the taking of certain drugs. Nor is the keenness of a pleasure ever a sign of the importance of the thing one is doing. A gourmand no doubt receives a thrill from an unusually well-prepared meal, though at the same time his physical state may not in the least require food. Obviously, with so fleeting and unpredictable a thing as pleasure, we cannot go far in discovering any real standards of value for the book or

[1] See Chapter III.

poem one may be reading. For, after all, it is the activity that counts, and not the shadow that accompanies it.

Furthermore, the pursuit of pleasure for its own sake has a way of defeating its own ends and giving us the well-known law of diminishing returns. Each renewed effort to catch the old thrill will require a stronger stimulus. We know this in the case of drug addicts. We can see it also in the manner in which sensational news and *risqué* plots must constantly come out with bolder faced type and more open temptations for perverted palates.[1]

It is precisely because impressionism offers so little in the way of a critical standard, and because it holds out no prospect but the anarchy of extreme individualism, that it cannot long survive as a critical theory. To say all this is to bring against it the severest charge possible in the field of art—it overlooks the fact that all art somehow is directly concerned with reality and not with the casual attitudes of irresponsible or eccentric individuals. Art is not different from life. For precisely this reason the German dramatic critic, Alfred Kerr, thus dismisses it with a gesture: "One who is only an impressionist may perish of his critical futility."[2]

Partly to meet this double paradox comes the newer and more generally accepted theory of expressionism. It is not hard to drive a wedge into the contention of the impressionist that all literary judgments are purely individual. A critic cannot very easily isolate himself in art and literature in a theory of solipsism, no matter what he may be able to do as a philosopher. The mere practical consideration of the fact of communication is enough at least to give him pause, for literature is founded upon the very premise of the necessity of being able to infect others with a state of mind. There is in addition the obvious fact that there is such a thing as race experience which enters into experience in a thousand ways, and often quite unconsciously, and gives value to nearly every act in life. These things are too large for any but an enthusiast to overlook.

[1] Shelley in his *Defense of Poetry* points to this fact as one of the causes for the downfall of poetry in Greece and Rome, "for the end of social corruption is to destroy all sensibility to pleasure."

[2] It might here be permitted to contrast the delicately impressionistic *Marius the Epicurean* by Pater with the sturdier *Wilhelm Meister* by Goethe. There is an absence of reality in the one that is startling.

Taste, to the expressionist, is a creative activity, and is the ability all possess in a greater or less degree of being able to receive the experience of the poet or artist. It is not a sixth sense; there is about it nothing mystical or even extraordinary. Everyone has it in some measure. If one can from the sight of a painted canvas, or from the sound of a score of music, or from the sight of the printed lines of a poem, or from the acted lines of a drama, live over again in one's own mind the experience of the artist, one is to that extent at least an artist oneself and a person with a taste not altogether incommensurable. Thus one can, in *Hamlet* or in the *Divine Comedy,* or in *Faust,* live again the experience of a Shakespeare, a Dante, a Goethe. We are poets and artists to the extent that our tastes allow. In this fact, then, is discovered the problem of criticism; and in this way we avoid the first great anarchy of impressionist theory. Art thus does not divide people, but unites them by means of common experience.

There is much excellence, as we have seen, in this position of the philosopher-critic, Croce. There is, however, one residual question that forces itself insistently upon us. Somehow it is difficult to think of taste without feeling that somewhere connected with its activity there is the question of the selection of what is good and rejection of what is inferior. Like Coleridge, one can't easily divest oneself of the thought that it has some implications of value. In the expressionist definition, good as it is, precisely this one sense of value seems absent. Taste, to him, rejects only what it is by previous experience unable creatively to produce, or what has been imperfectly expressed. But if it can create, then it must, by the same account, accept whole-heartedly. At least this is the logical implication of the argument in Croce's *Æsthetics;* and it has become the battle cry of several of his more noisy disciples, like Spingarn.[1] And somehow at best it leaves one uncomfortable, as though one had gone out, lured by a bright early spring sun, and left an overcoat at home.

For if an experience gets itself expressed, it is its own excuse

[1] J. E. Spingarn, *Creative Criticism.* Quotation reprinted by permission of Harcourt, Brace and Company, Inc.

for being. This is the theory again of art for art's sake, as vividly proclaimed as ever by the impressionists. All moral judgments must be dismissed. According to Spingarn:

> If the achievement of the poet be to express any material he may select, and to express it with a completeness that we recognize as perfection, obviously morals can play no part in the judgment which Criticism may form of his work. To say that poetry is moral or immoral is as meaningless as to say that an equilateral triangle is moral and an isosceles triangle immoral, or to speak of the immorality of a musical chord or a Gothic arch. It is only conceivable in a world in which dinner-table conversation runs after this fashion: "This cauliflower would be good if it had been prepared in accordance with international law." "Do you know why my cook's pastry is so good? Because he has never told a lie or seduced a woman." . . . The poet's only moral duty, as a poet, is to be true to his art, and to express his vision of reality as well as he can.

Spingarn is brilliant, but is he not also a little irrelevant? Suppose his cook had prepared night-shade or made a ragout of infected venison, with all the perfection of culinary art. Would his guests have been compelled to call the dinner good? And would the dinner have sat well on their stomachs? And may not a poem or novel, though perfectly expressed, have at its heart an experience that is likewise poisonous or diseased? The question does involve the further question of value. A trifle of Socratic dialectics will quickly show how inadequately he is using the argument by analogy. And if a work of art is its own excuse for being, and self-expression the artist's duty without the least thought of the feelings of the public, why all this pother about publishers and readers and the plaintive cry for recognition?

But the critic is only paraphrasing in a dramatic manner Croce's own phrase, "Beauty is successful expression. The ugly is blundering expression." There are, hence, no degrees in beauty, though there may be differences in kind. "Beauty is unique and always perfect. The ugly only admits of degrees." What a comforting thought, this, to lesser and mediocre poets, if they can only lift their voices in a trifle of perfect melody. From

it, too, has come a new turn to the word beauty. Anything today is beautiful if it be only adequately expressed; and so we have Beauty, always with a capital B, tacked like a label at times even on journalistic, documentary studies of our baser appetites, for are they not adequately expressed? Or an "expression" may turn in another direction and perpetrate upon us such obscure grotesqueries as Miss Sitwell's poem on page 29. To such devotees, any contact with reality or common sense which is according to the old method is offering incense to strange gods. For Beauty to them is a state of mind and any effort at communication of it a thing they fancy must correspond.

If they offend the moral sense—well, again we have the comforting words of Croce. Morality concerns only the acts of men, not their expression. If a book, which is the externalization of the expression, and hence, as we saw in a former chapter, a "practical" act, offends the moral sense of a community, there is the police.[1] Spingarn, however, would go farther; he would jail not the book but the public: "If the ideals enunciated by poets are not those which we admire most, we must blame not the poets but ourselves; in the world where morals count we have failed to give them the proper material out of which to rear a noble edifice."

Thus expressionism divorces completely the practical life from the art life. The two move upon two different levels. We can in "expression" commit the seven deadly sins and create "Beauty" and be fit companions for angels. If we do the same things in the practical world we go to jail, and, if orthodox, to places yet more unpleasant. Obviously expressionism, though it has offered a hint, and a valuable one, on taste, has not gone far in helping toward a solution of the question of value. For in the new equation it has given us, intuition = expression = Beauty =

[1] Croce's chief interest is in thus delineating the spheres of mental activity—*e.g.*, the æsthetic, the economical, the ethic. Error consists in the intrusion of one sphere into another—*e.g.*, as above, the ethic into the æsthetic. But his fundamental error consists in thus dividing into separate and water-tight compartments the unity of human nature, and then judging human activities by partial standards.

value, it has served only to further confuse.[1] Yet we must not be too severe. Beauty, though we may not like the term, the expressionist has shown is an activity, and in this fact at least we have something more tangible than the impressionist's shadow, pleasure.

What one finds most difficult to follow in the theory just described, as well as in its predecessor, is the divorce between the practical life and the so-called æsthetic. The theory of art for art's sake everywhere leads us into the morass of art for nothing's sake, and art becomes a mere appanage of life, which the good practical man does well to ignore. Is it not precisely because of the large prevalence of this theory in our world today that there is the large ignoring, if not active discrediting, of art and literature as a worthy pursuit for busy and practical men? Equally unfortunately, art has often become the toy of faddists and loose-brained seekers after novelties. We cannot build a national culture in this way.

No theory of value in literature and art can be complete or satisfying or just, which ignores the close relationship between art and life. The trouble with the impressionist is that he ignores largely the distinction between personal and social values, and the intimate manner in which these motives combine in almost every human activity. Further, he makes the value of art the thrill that one receives from the art experience, the most illusory and incalculable part of the experience. The trouble with the expressionist, on the other hand, seems to lie in an essential inability to discriminate between experiences; and for values he talks in indefinite terms about Beauty and creative ability, forgetting often that these have value only in terms of living. Value can have abiding significance only if it can somehow be associated with the ideal of the good life. If it can be found that literature in some way promotes the ideal of the good life, if the creative activity of poetry and good prose can be discovered to be a means for enlarging the scope of one's powers to live well, we shall have no great difficulty, I fancy, in putting our finger upon an answer to this question of value and taste.

[2] See Papini, *Four and Twenty Minds* and Struckmeyer.

Many valuable critics have already pointed the way. Shelley in his *Defense of Poetry* laid the burden of the large social unrest of his time upon the lack of a creative imagination. "We want the creative faculty to imagine that which we know; we want the generous impulse to act that which we imagine; we want the poetry of life." If this want of contact between the imaginative life of poetry and the practical life of science and knowledge was a source of distress at the beginning of the nineteenth century, how much more severe are its symptoms today! To Shelley, poetry is a means of enriching life and enabling men to live more fully and to subdue to their imaginative needs the accumulations of science. This may seem a little vague, but in the sequel I hope it will become clearer. Long before Shelley, an old educator, Æneas Sylvius, set his opinion of the value of poetry quite as high: "Poetry is our guide to the true meaning of the past, to a right estimate of the present, to a sound forecast of the future."

A more modern critic, Wilhelm Dilthey, writes in much the same manner: "The art of the greatest poets, then, consists in so presenting an action that the inner coherence and meaning of life itself shall arise from it. Thus poetry opens to us the understanding of life. Through the eyes of the great poets we become aware of the values and interconnection of all human things." And it is Goethe, the greatest of the German thinkers on art and poetry, who found that the only complete training for life was through art and practical activity combined; and the highest goal the Three Reverences, reverences based on complete knowledge, reverence for the things below us, reverence for our equals, and reverence for the things above us. Indeed, the drama of *Faust* is an allegory of the search for value in life and art. And after a tour of the world as an impressionist in search of truth, Faust, in Part II, comes to a higher knowledge, that the value of life is in free creative activity, an activity that brings into play the whole personality of man.

In this free, generous activity of the good life, as Goethe explains it for us in the *Faust,* there is room also for the impulse of irony. Faust is incomplete without his counterpart, Mephis-

topheles, who leaves him only at the moment of death. For irony is the paradoxical impulse of destruction—destruction of attitudes that have become stabilized and static, that have become accepted as conventions and now no longer have any vital connection with reality. These are the husks that life must break and leave behind, before it can be freely creative. Irony is the only efficient weapon against complacency.

To most, life is more or less a monotonous round. We spend our time in a narrow circle of duties and pleasures, with an instinctive, but unspoken, dread of the unusual or unexpected. Life itself, so we argue, is a flux, a never-ending turbulent stream, going whence we know not, and whither none can foresee. Let us build dikes against this flood, and within the narrow space thus reclaimed pattern a life to meet our needs, and lay out its walks and flower beds as well as its fields and factories, so that all may be orderly and prosperous, and free from foreign invasion. There we can find our Paradise; there we can protect ourselves from the terrors of the unknown. Thus it is that life to most is restricted to only a limited number of experiences, and these carefully graded in value, and the end of living the practical virtue of getting on.[1]

It is for this reason in part that the literature of our time seems, at times, so irrelevant in contrast to our immense strides in scientific and industrial achievement. Our daily literature, in the popular books and magazines, feeds these narrow orderly lives within the dikes, and meets the attitudes which we find so agreeable and easy. Yet at the same time we are in contact with a world that in the last few generations has been expanded infinitely. But how little of this new accumulation of knowledge have we reduced by conquest to our imaginative needs. This is what Shelley means when he says that "we want the creative faculty to imagine what we know." For we have not yet allowed our poetry and literature—that is, our familiar poetry and literature—to make us imaginatively comfortable in this new world.

[1] It is possible for each person to study his own mind when it works freely, idling in reverie, or building castles in Spain. What particular impulses does one discover at such times? What memories does one play with? What plans for the future? Sometimes such a study is a bit of a shock.

It is this same thought that has caused many critics to fear that man will end by being crushed under the load of his accumulated knowledge. In contact as we are with a new universe, it is not at all surprising that imaginatively we stand before our own accomplishment puzzled and bewildered and even frightened, like a stranger in a foreign city or a child before the mystery of the dark.[1]

The good life, on the other hand, the life of free creative activity, is one which has the largest number of points of free human contact. It brings into activity the whole nature of man, with the fewest possible number of suppressions or distortions. Or as Aristotle has it in his *Politics,* "Any occupation, art, or science, which makes the body or soul or mind of the free man less fit for the practice or exercise of virtue is vulgar." Thus it was Aristotle who first defined the state of ideal happiness, *"eudæmonia,"* as an "activity of soul" requiring a "complete life." Nor was the ideal with him associated with any severe austerity, for to him it also included the purely material conditions of health and prosperity.

The person whose life is richest touches life at many points, at each creating new desires or, as the psychologist prefers to call them, appetencies, for many of these are unconscious. The gratification of an appetency is good, so long as it does not involve the suppression of another equally or more valuable. It requires no easy personal adjustment so to organize one's life as to respond thus easily and spontaneously to the welter of claims by which one is constantly beset. There are the purely personal appetites, there are the social demands of one's environment, there are the million and one varied calls that throng every waking and even every sleeping moment. How shall a man so organize his responses through experience that he will in all this multitude find a pattern which will reconcile these conflicting claims and desires, and yet preserve this much to be desired freedom? This is the practical problem of generous living.

This much desired harmony of human nature, which here is

[1] This thought is treated from a different point of view in Chapter IX, Poetry and Science.

called the idea of the good life, is at the opposite pole from that aimless existence which seems spontaneous only because it is the sport of every random impulse. For in it the harmony is the result of a conscious achievement. It is not a restful life because it betrays few storms. It has succeeded in achieving a harmony of all the varied faculties of the mind, the intellect and reason, the will and the perceptions. And because its harmony is perfect, there are no disruptive explosions of the emotions which lay waste lesser people; because it has discovered the secret, it can feel even more deeply and yet not risk disaster. But it is an attainment that costs effort. "What a chaos, what a subject of contradictions is man," writes Pascal. "This inner conflict of the reason against the passions has caused those who seek peace to be divided into two sects: the one who strive to subdue passion and become gods, the other who strive to renounce reason and become brutes. But in vain, for either the one or the other." It is the result of a discipline utterly at odds with the easy philosophy of the expressionist, who under the generous cloak of so-called self-expression can shelter vagaries and inconsistencies without number.

It is, hence, not a narrow epicureanism, for it recognizes that pleasure is a fleeting and unpredictable shadow. It recognizes also that the man who pursues only the call of personal welfare or ambition is at the same time suppressing the claim upon him of others, and that to follow a purely selfish career is at the cost of certain suppressions of social values that perhaps in the long run are far more important. On the other hand, it has no place in it for the severer ideals of asceticism, for this carries a cost of certain suppressions that will also in the long run create serious losses. One does not need to read far in some of the ascetic literature of the Middle Ages to discover the heavy price many of those who had turned their back on the world paid for their austerity. One can hear at times the cry of Aucassin: "Into Paradise go those same old priests, and halt old men and maimed, who all day and night cower continually before the altars, and in the crypts; and such folk as wear old camices and old clouted frocks,

naked folk and shoeless and covered with sores, perishing of hunger and thirst, and of cold, and of little ease. These be they that go into Paradise, with them I have nothing to make." The good life is neither an epicurean nor an ascetic ideal.

To some it even appears that there are today many who in a revolt against a fancied survival of chivalry and asceticism have discovered, or seem on the point of discovering, a new asceticism. This time they suppress, not the old desires of the body and search for their compensations in the rituals of chivalry or the church, but all motives for human life higher than greed and lust and personal ambition or flatulent commonplaceness. If the old ascetic sinned against the good life by denying the brute, the new sins no less by denying the god.

It is the value of literature, as of all art, that it helps to supply precisely the experiences that enable a mind thus completely to organize itself. Without it our experience is limited largely to ourselves, to the few with whom we may come in contact, and to the narrow round of routine in which we are inevitably fixed. In the larger and freer world of literature we may find life and find it more abundantly, and discover thus compensations for the restrictions of habit and environment.

It is right, therefore, when we approach a book, to ask, not with what fidelity has the author created the illusion of reality, nor how precise is his reference to his documents, nor how potent is his imagery, for these as we have seen are only the means the writer selects that he may communicate his attitude; but what new attitudes toward life has he for us. How far does he lift us above the level of the conventional and the commonplace? The essential greatness of all great literature lies in the fact that it enables us to touch life freely at new points. Wordsworth's plea was for a more spontaneous experience of nature, as though nature and man shared a common spirit, which fact man had forgotten. It is easy to read Wordsworth today, because the attitudes he then made available are today more general. And Tolstoy, in his plea for the simple life, summons us away from the luxury and complexity of modern life to the simple routine of

peasants, not because luxury and complexity are bad in themselves, but because he saw that they had become "fixed" attitudes, and hence offered little opportunity for spontaneous living. It was not that the peasant himself was more spontaneous, but that Tolstoy in the field and at his peasant task found a new freshness in living, and thought he had discovered an unknown world. A fresh attitude toward life is always an unknown world newly discovered.

But if it is the value of literature to discover to us fresh attitudes, and thus to permit organization upon higher levels, we have found the answer to two perplexing questions that have pursued us since the beginning. Literature and art have a very genuine and vital connection with morals; not perhaps with morals as a code of social conduct, but with morals in the larger sense, as the essence of good living. No one is quite the same person after a new experience. The new mental and moral response and the new attitudes have for better or worse entered into the very personality of the reader. Montaigne, speaking of Plutarch, to whom he owed more than to any other, wrote, "to some it is merely a grammar study, to others the very anatomy of philosophy." And it requires no large reading of the French essayist to see how deeply the Greek humanist had entered into his pupil's life. The variety and depth of the attitudes that literature thus makes available are of the very essence of morals, for they are also of the very essence of life.

Then, further, a clue now can be discovered which will enable us to judge the value of a particular book or play or poem. For the question can now be asked, what attitude does it leave with the reader? "A good poet," said Don Quixote, "is a kind of alchemist, who can turn the matters he prepares into the purest gold, and an inestimable treasure." Cervantes himself did this with the most unpromising of material, a crack-brained old country squire, and a clumsy peasant. But the writer can also prepare poison. And between the two one can judge with much the same certainty as in the varied circumstances of life itself.

It is not sordidness or the picture of human degradation that

is necessarily demoralizing. Great poetry is able to find "an inestimable treasure" even in man's deepest downfall. Dante drags us through the pit of Hell. Shakespeare more than once shows us the man-beast at his most bestial. The so-called immoralities are not necessarily immoral in their effect. But it is appropriate to ask of such an experience: does it leave us with a sense of loss? Has it tended to suppress or distort other attitudes toward life which we know are valuable? One might illustrate with a novel that has been justly praised for its adequacy as a piece of documentary realism, Theodore Dreiser's *American Tragedy*. If it leaves one with the attitude that the issues of life are a futile game in which brute instinct and greed and witless animal affection are the leading motives, we can pronounce a judgment without much hesitation. Or does it leave one with an attitude of pity for the waste in our American civilization, of youth jettisoned prematurely and all unprovided? If this be the answer, the judgment will be of another kind.

The value of literature is not that of journalism. In the presenting of news, the reporter has as his chief problem that of disinterested accuracy. The same aloofness is also desired in a faithful witness. In this respect, journalism merely bears competent witness to life, allowing the reader to draw his own conclusions. But in a work of literature what is of utmost concern is the author's personal reaction to and use of his experience. Life may in itself be a flux, but man does not always swim with the current; and in this essential conflict, at times with a hostile world, the author makes that portion of the flux with which he comes into contact of personal worth to him, and from it he gains his peculiar attitude toward living, or his philosophy of life. "What we all wish," writes Mr. Llewellyn Jones, "above all things, is for a universe that shall be all significant and no mere brute contingency. In artistic experience that is just what we get." We get it because an artist has created it. It is precisely because of this that the two much abused terms, realism and idealism, as they are much bandied about in criticism, are often in essence so meaningless. For a sincere work is always the com-

munication of a real experience; and because it has taken shape in the imagination of the artist, it transcends "brute contingency," and has an idea. In this sense, I believe, we can understand what Aristotle means, when he says, "Art transcends the limitations of nature." The same thought was put into the mouth of the wise Don Quixote. "Art cannot go beyond nature, but only adds to its perfection."

I think in this definition of value we have also secured one for taste. It is, as the expressionist has said, the power to accept the experience of the poem or story, that is, to re-live the experience of the author, so far as the limitations of the reader will permit. As such, we can take for it the description by Coleridge as "the representative and reward of our past conscious reasonings, insights, and conclusions." This will give it an undoubted moral significance. But it also has this further power; in accepting the experience and the attitudes, it also pronounces judgment on their value. It is, therefore, necessary to train taste, to educate it so that it will respond only to the best; and for this, as Goethe said, we want the "contemplation, not of the tolerably good, but of the truly excellent." It is only when this has been done that taste ceases to be the *"Juif errant"* always on voyages without end.

In this sense, then, we can accept the saying of Ben Jonson, "to judge of poets is only the faculty of poets; and not of all poets, but the best." For the best poets alone have ready experience of a quality to permit judgment on their equals and inferiors. But as all competent readers have also a measure of the gift, taste can be refined and, by contact with the best, trained to detect not only the spurious or mediocre but also the different degrees of the good. There are no mechanical standards or formulas which can be externally applied. But seen in perspective, the history of literature is the mountain range against which we measure the height of these later authors.

It should, finally, no longer be difficult to see why tastes differ. A taste that is based upon a low level of experience and which has available only a restricted number of easy attitudes cannot understand a larger and complex experience; and its judgment of

such an one will always be futile. The best taste is, however, the one with the largest fund of stored experience to draw upon, and the largest available variety of free responses. In this sense we can accept the thought of Coleridge that "true taste is virtue." For virtue is perhaps an adequate description of the good life. Furthermore, though all criticism and value possess a degree of relativity, it is not the relativity of caprice. For though tastes may differ, the best taste, because of its wider experience and its recognition of what tradition is, has in it also something of universality. For into these experiences of the reader, whether of high or low level, tradition, that is, race experience, with its approved attitudes, will most indubitably enter. Nor are all inherited attitudes, or those acquired by education, to be sneered at by individualists, for they are the result of the natural social consciousness of man. Each original author likewise serves to enrich and give new meaning to this tradition. It is pertinent to ask, as did Shelley, what would the world of civilization be, were it not for the tradition of the great poets; without them our lives would be infinitely poorer.

To literature, then, regarded as a means of enriching life and lending to it a higher code of values, may be brought the five *pierres de touche* of Sainte-Beuve when we once have thus understood their nature. For they are seen no longer to be external things against which a poem or a drama is to be measured, and a reading taken in the manner of a laboratory. Instead, they become a part of the mental equipment of the critic, and memory and associations are stirred into activity as he reads. From this point of view, judging a work of art is part of the process of living the work of art. If the reader has once learned the secret of the value of the great he will never be able to lend his complete approval to something that approaches on a lower level.[1]

[1] The theory of the poet Schiller, that art is a species of imaginative play, has always had a peculiar fascination for many. I believe the philosopher-poet had a thought in mind not dissimilar to the one above. Play is essentially experience that prepares for the exigencies of living by giving suppleness to the wits and muscles against the day when they will be seriously needed. Art and literature, similarly, make nimble the mind by means of experience. Only the experiences of literature are not trifling and irrelevant—at least, those of great literature—and they are often more nearly perfect, *i.e.*, have better form, than the corresponding experiences met in real life. In addition, and this is not their least value, they are infinitely more varied than the experiences that can fall to the lot of most.

Chapter VII

THE SECRET OF GREATNESS

GREATNESS AND POPULARITY—A PARADOX—THE IMMORTAL PHRASE—SECRET OF ITS POWER—THE IMAGINATION—WIT—THE SECRET OF GREATNESS—LARGENESS OF SCOPE—LONGINUS ON THE SUBLIME—THE THEME—THE IMAGERY—COMPLEXITY—IRONY—COSMIC EMOTION—IMPERSONALITY—REQUIREMENTS IN THE READER—GREATNESS IN PROSE—THE LARGER ATTITUDE—MILTON—ÆSCHYLUS—PLOT—PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE—PERSONALITY—PERSONALITY AND CHARACTER—UNIVERSALITY—THE AUTHOR'S BACKGROUND—LEVELS OF APPROACH—JUDGMENT.

Not long ago I read this confession in a publication that boasts its easy access to every American home: "I would infinitely rather write a kindly tale of real people who feel and live and struggle, and know that four million Americans are reading for half an hour my story in an American magazine—I would far rather write that story than to have written *Wuthering Heights.*" One may easily imagine that a sentiment like this will find a flattering welcome in four million hearts, for who of these millions has read *Wuthering Heights?* But the novel by Miss Brontë also is a tale of "real people who feel and live and struggle"; and though never a best seller, as books go today, it has qualities most best sellers cannot dream of possessing. Is it that the author of this wise saying feels that it is better to be mediocre and read by four million, than to be great and reach only a few hundred? Is it also true that he can achieve easy and popular mediocrity and at the same time write of "real people who feel and live and struggle"?

I am reminded of a sentence in Sainte-Beuve, that wise old French critic, who surely also knew his public. He was not much

given to fits of depression, but once in a while he gives way to a moment of bitterness. He is speaking of criticism, but what he says applies also to all literature: "I have long been convinced that nearly everybody strongly resents truth in criticism; to them it is ironical and uncomfortable; they want a truth accommodated to their habits, and to the passions of parties and cliques." The critic's office is indeed not always a comfortable one. But the question has been raised, can popular fiction that numbers its readers by the millions be true; can it tell of "real people who feel and live and struggle," and if it can, what will be its value to that same four million?

There is one other thought before we embark on this quest. The great critic, Longinus, who, though he lived in the second century A.D., when literature was in a decline, was one of the very keenest of lovers of great literature, wrote this most excellent sentence: "Nature did thus implant in our souls an invincible and eternal love of that which is great, and by our standards divine." This would seem to contradict the brilliant Frenchman; and between the two on a doubtful matter my vote would go to the Greek. But we have here a paradox, and before it can be resolved it will be necessary to inquire more closely into the secret of greatness in literature and especially of poetry. It may not be so difficult to reconcile the Frenchman and the Greek. What is greatness in literature?

It will be necessary, for obvious reasons, to keep poetry and prose separate in the answer for a time. For they proceed by slightly different methods, and have different aims. But the value of each, we have seen, is essentially the same, and ultimately also, we hope, will be the secret of their greatness.

To begin with poetry. One of the choicest possessions one can have in memory is the single effective poetic phrase. I can never quite forget the thrill of delight with which as a boy I greeted the line:

Battlements that on their restless fronts bore stars.

Such are the things some call immortal lines, magic phrases, single gems of poetic imagery. It is an interesting exercise to

recall the most vivid. Dante's *"O in eterno faticoso manto,"* the epithet accompanying the description of the "heavy mantles" of lead the hypocrites were doomed to wear "for eternity"; Shakespeare's "Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang"; Lucretius' *"Longe flammantia moenia mundi,"* (the far flaming ramparts of the universe); Leopardi's epithet for a humble flower: *"Contenta dei deserti,"* (contented in a desert); Catullus' description of death: *"Nox est perpetua una dormienda,"* (night is an endless sleep).

It is not alone the rhythmic pattern, the magic incantation, of these that is the secret of their never-ending charm, perfect though it be.[1] Nor is it the thought, for the idea is not always far above the commonplace, as is easy to ascertain if one tries to translate. They are infinitely above translation. Nor is it the imagery, perfect as it may be. One can find equally fine imagery in a passage that will not ring out quite so uniquely or so convincingly. The secret lies in the fact that in each phrase there is the union of two quite different impulses—paradoxical even—and their perfect fusion is its charm.

In eterno—faticoso: (Weary—for eternity): Bare ruined choirs—sweet birds sang: *Moenia—Mundi:* (Ramparts—of the universe).

Each of these phrases is in truth a deep experience, involving very powerful impulses and effecting a union of at least two that seem to contradict each other.[2]

The same motive will explain the reason for the greatness of the really successful sonnet, and why of all varieties of poetry it is the one most difficult to make great. There is, on the one hand, the octave which carries a series of parallel impulses, as it were, impulses similar in tone and color; and then the sestet which brings in a complementary and perhaps contradictory series of impulses. Success is not achieved unless these two phases of the experience are adequately fused into a perfect attitude. It is a

[1] It is an interesting exercise to examine these lines closely—to note the use of alliteration and assonances. Note the repetition of the long "o" in Dante's line. The line sobs with weariness.

[2] Matthew Arnold makes of these immortal phrases one of the means of judging the greatness of the poem that contains them.

delicate task or, rather, a superbly ordered brief experience; it is no wonder that it is so seldom perfectly achieved, and that its achievement is a sign of genius.

Of this superlatively fine character is this sonnet on *Evening on Calais Beach* by Wordsworth:

> It is a beauteous evening, calm and free,
> The holy time is quiet as a Nun
> Breathless with adoration; the broad sun
> Is sinking down in its tranquillity;
> The gentleness of heaven is on the sea:
> Listen! the mighty Being is awake,
> And doth with his eternal motion make
> A sound like thunder—everlastingly.
> Dear Child! dear Girl! that walkest with me here,
> If thou appear untouch'd by solemn thought,
> Thy nature is not therefore less divine:
> Thou liest in Abraham's bosom all the year;
> And worshipp'st at the Temple's inner shrine,
> God being with thee when we know it not.

In the sestet we have irony, a flat contradiction of the movement of the two quatrains with their majestic grandeur. Yet the thoughtless and even irrelevant girl is fused into the cathedral solemnity of the rhythm and imagery of the octave, and is perfectly at home. But it is the startling originality of this experience, the utterly unexpected ability to bring together such divergent impulses, that is the secret of its greatness.[1]

Keats has done the same thing in his *Last Sonnet* (see page 70). The poem begins with the effective imagery of the steadfastness of the star gazing still unmoved upon the changing face of nature. Then in the sestet it turns to a far more commonplace motive, the love of a shaken, dying man for a woman, and the desire for rest. In the hands of any but a genius the last would have sunk to sentimental banality, and the fusion of the

[1] Contrast with this Rupert Brooke's *The Voice*, where we have a somewhat similar beginning of an experience, but with an utterly different and much more obvious ending. There is an effort here to supply the stimulus for the experience by the use of realistic detail—a thing that will be noted in its place.

sublimity of the first and the sensuous love of the second could never have been achieved. It is difficult to interest sidereal majesty in the erotics even of a sick poet—unless he be a Keats—for it requires more than a languid imagination.

It is high time that we proceed to a definition of this term, imagination, for it has been used repeatedly in the course of this inquiry. In its power we shall find much of the secret of the greatness of poetry and also of prose.[1] It was Shelley, again, in his *Defense of Poetry,* who first called attention to the large power of the poetic imagination to bring together into an experience elements that were ordinarily mutually antagonistic: "it marries exultation and horror, grief and pleasure, eternity and change; it subdues to union under its light yoke, all irreconcilable things." But Coleridge proceeds to discover the full implication of this power. The passage from his *Biographia Litteraria* should be quoted entire.

> The poet, described in ideal perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other according to their relative worth and dignity. He diffuses a tone and spirit of unity, that blends, and (as it were) *fuses,* each into each, by that synthetic and magical power, to which I would exclusively appropriate the name of Imagination. This power, first put in action by the will and understanding, and retained under their irremissive, though gentle and unnoticed, control, *laxis effertur habenis,* reveals itself in the balance or reconcilement of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness with difference; of the general with the concrete; the idea with the image; the individual with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness with old and familiar objects; a more than usual state of emotion with more than usual order; judgment ever awake and steady self-possession with enthusiasm and feeling profound or vehement; and while it blends and harmonizes the natural and the artificial, still subordinates art to nature; the manner to the matter; and our admiration of the poet to our sympathy with the poetry.[2]

[1] See I. H. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism,* Chapter XXXII.

[2] This definition of the imagination and that of the fancy, which Coleridge has also made (and to which reference will be made later) is naturally an arbitrary use of the terms, which we accept because Coleridge and others have given them their vogue. De Sanctis in his *Storia della Letteratura Italiana,* Vol. I, p. 62, uses them in a quite different manner. He uses fancy, *la fantasia,* much as Coleridge

But this union of "discordant qualities" must be felt to be deeply appropriate and convincing, and not a marriage of the unexpected or bizarre. To do this alone is not to produce great poetry, but to exhibit one's "wit." Wit is striking and original, and shows a use of the imagination, but it shows also something fatally below the level of great poetry or even prose. One cannot help liking this couplet, for example; it is clever, to the point, and unforgettable:

"Églé, belle et poète, a deux petits travers:
Elle fait son visage, et ne fait pas ses vers."

It is the same quality, of something bizarre introduced at the end, that is the sting in the tail of the Epigram. Here is a delicious one by a modern poet:[1]

Here an atheist poet lies
In disappointment and surprise,
To find—in spite of all he'd said—
Himself alive, his poems dead.

Put this by Byron beside Milton's sonnet on his having arrived at the age of twenty-three and it is possible to detect the difference between wit and good poetry:

Through life's dull road so dim and dirty,
I have dragged to three and thirty.
What have these years left to me?
Nothing—except thirty-three.

When this unusual union appears in a lyric and the elements, though strangers apparently to each other, meet without constraint, we have "wit," a *jeu d'esprit,* that pleases, not because of its essential inevitability, but because there is yet remaining something of a good-mannered truce, as between people brought together unexpectedly. Of this character are Jonson's famous song, beginning "Drink to me only with thine eyes," and Landor's

uses imagination. But with the Italian critic, the imagination, *l'immaginazione,* has a significance somewhat different from Coleridge's fancy. There is a great deal in common between the art theories of De Sanctis and Croce.

[1] From G. R. Hamilton, *Epigrams.*

Dirce. Many like this poem by Abraham Cowley, describing wit at its best. I select one stanza:

> In a true piece of *wit* all things must be,
> Yet all things there *agree.*
> As in the Ark, joyn'd without force or strife,
> All *Creatures* dwelt; all *Creatures* that had *Life.*
> Or as the *Primitive Forms* of all
> (If we compare great things with small)
> Which without *Discord* or *Confusion* lie,
> In that strange *Mirror* of the *Deitie.*

The obvious danger here is frigidity, where the strangers show abundant signs of being desirous of remaining strangers. Or to put it into our critical jargon, the elements of the experience will not fuse, and the experience remains imperfect. This seems to be an undeniable fact with the poem, *The Ecstasy,* by John Donne. It was something of the same difficulty that was found in the little poem by Joyce Kilmer on the tree.

For "wit" has in it something of the comic spirit of the unexpected, and its first appeal is to the power of discrimination that will examine the discrepancy between the parties so unexpectedly brought before its bar before pronouncing on the nice appropriateness of their union. It is thus rather more of an intellectual exercise than an experience that "brings the whole soul of man into activity." As brilliant but superficial conversation, no matter how stimulating to intellectual alertness, differs from heart speaking to heart of friends, so poetic "wit" is forever barred by its nature from the levels of great poetry.

For it is not the eccentricity or uniqueness of the experience, or of the elements of the experience, that makes for poetic greatness, but its quality. Nor, on the other hand, is a favorite poem necessarily great, though it may speak to us with an intimacy that is altogether disarming. Here, for example, is an exquisite little thing by Coventry Patmore that has started many tears:

> My little Son, who look'd from thoughtful eyes
> And moved and spoke in quiet grown-up wise,

Having my law the seventh time disobey'd,
I struck him, and dismiss'd
With hard words and unkiss'd,
—His Mother, who was patient, being dead.
Then, fearing lest his grief should hinder sleep,
I visited his bed,
But found him slumbering deep,
With darken'd eyelids, and their lashes yet
From his late sobbing wet.
And I, with moan,
Kissing away his tears, left others of my own;
For, on a table drawn beside his head,
He had put, within his reach,
A box of counters and a red-vein'd stone,
A piece of glass abraded by the beach,
And six or seven shells,
A bottle with bluebells,
And two French copper coins, ranged there with careful art,
To comfort his sad heart.
So when that night I pray'd
To God, I wept, and said:
Ah, when at last we lie with tranced breath,
Not vexing Thee in death,
And Thou rememberest of what toys
We made our joys,
How weakly understood
Thy great commanded good,
Then, fatherly not less
Than I whom Thou hast moulded from the clay,
Thou'lt leave Thy wrath, and say:
'I will be sorry for their childishness.'

For here the impulses, the elements in the experience, are of a variety that are often found together. For we are all by previous experience provided with the appropriate response to such poetry of pathetic childhood. Yet there is something undeniably precious in these poems that keeps awake the impulse of pity and the readiness to feel sympathy with the unfortunate. The danger

is that they pass almost unnoticed into sentimentality. Such poems do not show the power of the imagination, for here we are using elements that are almost universally available. Further, such an experience is highly specialized; again, it does not "bring the whole soul of man into activity."

For this is the quality of great poetry. It is not limited in its range by any narrow horizon of single or simple interests, or specialized and restricted activities of the mind. For the great poet paints on a canvas wider than the scope of everyday experience. "He dips," writes George Santayana, "into the chaos that underlies the rational shell of the world and brings up some superfluous image, some emotion dropped by the way, and reattaches it to the present object; he reinstates things unnecessary, he emphasizes things ignored, he paints in again into the landscape the tints which the intellect has allowed to fade from it. If he seems sometimes to obscure a fact, it is only because he is restoring an experience." This is excellent, and is no more than to say that the poet is ever in search of an experience that will "lift the veil from the hidden beauty of the world"—a beauty the practical life is unable to fathom. Intimate poetry lacks that magic of a new discovery, the feeling of an almost accidental voyage into an unexpected region of human possibilities and a revelation of the scope of the human mind.

In this sense, great poets are veritable discoverers of new realms, and their poetry the journal of their conquest. "Its rudimentary essays," writes Santayana in the same connection, "in the region of fancy and pleasant sounds, as well as its idealization of episodes in human existence, are only partial exercises in an art that has all time and all experience for its natural subject matter and all possibilities of living for its ultimate theme." It is in exactly this sense that Longinus, that unknown man of genius, pronounces the sentence that real greatness in literature has in it something inspired, almost divine. Nature "implants in our souls the unconquerable love of whatever is elevated and more divine than we. Wherefore not even the entire universe suffices for the

thought and contemplation within the reach of the human mind, but our imaginations often pass beyond the bonds of space."

We recall that it was the same Longinus who gave us the recipe of great literature, noble thought, exalted passion, faultless diction and imagery. But great poetry is not made by recipe; we shall see that it must be architectural, but it is at the same time organic; and though we may talk of its ideas and its emotive qualities, these are things that may not be analyzed and separated, without at the same time taking away the breath of the experience. Critics speak wisely at times of a book's realism, or its power of characterization, or the exquisite imagery, or the convincing rhythm and phrase; but these things are never alone, or even together, the cause of greatness.

For the interest of the reader is in the totality of the experience, as his interest in a landscape or a portrait is in the picture as a whole, and not in some single detail. And its scope—that is, the number, complexity, and large variety of the impulses aroused and their color—will be a measure of its greatness. There will be ideas, and no experience is truly great which has not been stirred to adequate ideas in its course. But the experience must achieve the idea, not the idea cause the experience. The idea must be significant, but it gains its whole significance from the totality of the mental effort. No poem, or any other work of literature, is great because it is logical; it is logical because it is life, and life that has been satisfactorily lived by a great mind. The theme of the poem, in consequence, is not the subject, nor the simple thought that can be abstracted and left in the test tube. This last can perhaps, as has been said, be stated in ten words, but they will leave no hint of the poem's value. For the theme is the experience, and it must be adequately known before it can be defined or described.

Longfellow's *Psalm of Life* has, so far as mere ideas go, far more of a logical structure than Wordsworth's *Ode on Intimations of Immortality* or his shorter *Ode to Duty*. But it takes no careful reading to discover that in Longfellow's poem the ideas have been, as it were, put into poetic form, and that no great poetic

experience has achieved them. With the other poems the ideas seem to be caught by the poet from the rhythm of life itself. The one can be hung as a motto on the schoolroom wall; the others cannot be framed and pointed at, they can only be lived.

Or, to take a still greater example, the poem *Job* celebrates a not uncommon search for grounds for a belief in divine justice. But Job was not a philosopher, nor was the Hebrew poet who wrings the heart with his charge that the wicked prosper while the righteous under the harrow lift their hands to an unpitying sky. The poet in his agony of despair cries out against a universe that has a heart of stone. The idea is great in this poem because the experience is great; and because the experience is great, the poem is one of the world's greatest. It is greater than the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám,* because it comes from an experience which has a wider scope, though there are parts in Omar, like this quatrain, that remind us of the hopelessness of the Hebrew poet.

> And that inverted Bowl we call the Sky,
> Whereunder crawling coop't we live and die,
> Lift not thy hands to It for help—for It
> Rolls impotently on as Thou or I.

Yet the reason why the Hebrew wrote the greater poem lies specifically in this: *Job* is the challenge of a man made impotent by suffering, but raising his voice in reason and defiance against injustice. His voice, and reason, and defiance are eloquent with the rhythmic vibration of a deep conviction. There are ideas here, but it is not the voice of logic we follow, but the agony of a man suddenly disillusioned by One whom he had thought a faithful and intimate friend and whom now he addresses as his adversary. He presents his indictment:

> Lo, here is my signature, let the Almighty answer me;
> And that I had the indictment which mine adversary hath written,
> Surely I would carry it upon my shoulder;
> I would bind it unto me as a crown!
> I would declare unto him the number of my steps:
> As a prince would I go near him.

Facit indignatio versum (his indignation creates poetry). The *Rubáiyát,* on the other hand, is the harmonious musing of one whose disillusionment sits gracefully on his shoulders. There is no indignation, for the whole business is so futile that reproach is but a howling into the empty night. Job is a soul in passionate revolt; but Omar can find nothing worth the trouble of an outcry. An experience that accepts, and patiently or sorrowfully endures, is never as great as one that rebels, because there are not nearly the same number of mental issues involved, nor the variety.

Not in magical language, perfect imagery, or the charm of allusion, or the witchery of the incantation of the rhythm alone, can we find the secret of the great poem, though these together go far; and there can be no great poetry without all. It is through these and by their means that the varied impulses are roused, the emotions stimulated, and the ideas stirred into vitality. These in their complex activity are the imaginative indication of the *orderly* working of a whole personality "with the subordination of its faculties to each other according to their relative worth and dignity." It is because the whole personality has thus subdued the experience to its own intimate tone that each such experience, be it large or small, has a compelling sense of organic unity, and is unique.

Nor will a single impulse with its accompaniment of emotion and ideas, or a series of parallel impulses, though all may be exceedingly potent, be sufficient to make a poem great. Longinus had some such thought in his mind when he wrote that sublimity was not passion, but a "concourse of passion" combined into "a single whole." Without this concourse, the experience will lack richness and intensity. It marks the lack of what Lascelles Abercrombie calls "unconfused complexity." Or, again to use the words of Coleridge, such a poem will be more narrowly specialized, and will fail "to bring the whole soul of man into activity." A vigorous poem, but with the one-way movement of the mind, is easily recalled in the *Charge of the Light Brigade,* by Tennyson, or Browning's *Home Thoughts from Abroad,* and *Pippa's Song.* Another by Browning, in which the elements are more

unusual, but still generally of the same character, and in which the weirdness of the experience is strained almost to the breaking point, is that much discussed poem, *Childe Rolande to the Dark Tower Came*. The poet tried to catch an attitude which combined the eerie mood of the title and the horror of disillusionment.

Contrast with this last named, Browning's *My Last Duchess,* and it will not be difficult to discover the reason why this dramatic romance has a much larger scope and is a much greater poem. Here are the elements of tragedy. The innocent and joyous smile of the woman, the courteous cruelty of the husband, the callousness to human emotion, and yet the sensitiveness to the purely æsthetic of the æsthetic Italian Renaissance—it is idle to attempt to analyze these things; they are in the poem and they live, a criss-cross of impulses that finally coördinate and give the experience its uniqueness. To a poem which, like this, has a multitude of dissimilar concordances, one can return and on each re-reading discover new motives and new depths.

> Oh, sir, she smiled no doubt
> Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
> Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
> Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
> As if alive.

A great poem will bear even the impulse of irony: that is the precise opposite of the other leading impulses of the experience. And here against the pathetic background of the tragedy of the Duchess, who perished because she smiled, are a series of ironic comments. The husband still cherishes her picture, but only as a work of art, though he jealously guards it by a drawn curtain which none but he puts by. Yet hardly has he redrawn the curtain when he comments with much the same artistic indifference on the excellence of a bronze Neptune. With the same breath he also puts in his polite bid for a dowry as he negotiates for a new bride. It is only in the experience of a great poem that these paradoxical elements can successfully unite. But when they do,

and the poem is the result of a large inclusion, and not an exclusion, of heterogeneous impulses and ideas, we have the sign-manual of genius. Even Browning was not able to do it often. For the harmony in such an experience is not in the stimulating object, but in the mental response. It is found in the mind of the poet and is due to the larger suppleness of his imagination, his ability to discover the ironic comment, and to fuse all to one substance.[1] To a lesser poet these contradictory elements are too refractory.

Still of wider scope, and hence greater, are those poems that transcend all human activity, and seem, as it were, to look upon all life, and all nature, and all the universe *sub specie æternitatis,* to glimpse this world of human affairs as a part of a majestic whole, whose secret seems, in the intuition of the poet, for a moment to be laid bare. There is a moment of this "cosmic emotion" in the sonnet by Wordsworth quoted on page 151. You catch it again in his sonnet *Upon Westminster Bridge:*

Earth has not anything to show more fair:
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty:
This City now doth like a garment wear
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.
Never did sun more beautifully steep
In his first splendour valley, rock, or hill;
Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!
The river glideth at his own sweet will:
Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still!

You can find it not too infrequently in such poems as *The Prelude.* Shelley at times has it, as in some of the magnificent bursts of other-worldly joy in the *Prometheus Unbound.* For a moment the imagination of the poet rises above all limitations of

[1] For a full discussion of the value of irony, see Chapter XII, and Chapter XIII.

time and space and catches a vision of a scope that seems immortal. It is not to be wondered at that at such moments poetry becomes religion.[1] Whatever be their value as articles of revelation, these do serve as evidence of the scope of the poet's mind. Of such a character is that mighty Psalm, which has for centuries been a stirring of the depths to many and in turn a stimulus for much of our highest poetry.

> The heavens declare the glory of God;
> And the firmament sheweth his handiwork.
> Day unto day uttereth speech,
> And night unto night sheweth knowledge.
> There is no speech nor language,
> Where their voice is not heard.
> Their line is gone out through all the earth,
> And their words to the end of the world.

To this one may well respond with Sir Thomas Browne, "I love to lose myself in a mystery, to pleasure my reason to an *O altitudo.*"

It is because great poetry, like this, lacks the specialization of any single aspect of human life—that is, because it thus draws the whole personality into intense activity, the intellect, the will, the perceptive faculty, the emotions, and appeals to no single human need or interest or emotion—that we can say that it rises above the personal and becomes impersonal. It seems to stand alone, needing no buttress or support; its scope seems the whole of life; like a unique creation it is its own excuse for being; we can approach it from any angle, and its aspect is never the same. A lesser poem, on the other hand, speaks to one mood, and its ministrations may be exceedingly precious; but this has no mood, for it has all moods. In this connection it is not amiss to remember the words of Longinus on the same subject, only he is thinking here of the orator as well as of the poet: "Sublimity flashing forth at the right moment scatters everything before it like a thunderbolt." The richer the complexity, the larger the

[1] See Chapter IX, "Poetry and Religion."

view of life the author leaves, and of its meaning to him, and thus at farthest remove from the present or the practical; and in this fact lies the secret of its peculiar thrill.

To discover poems that meet these higher qualifications one must journey far. Dante reaches these heights repeatedly in his *Divine Comedy.* The Paolo and Francesca episode (*Inferno,* Canto 5), the resoluteness of Farinata (*Inferno,* Canto 10), the blasphemous effrontery of the thief, Vanni Fucci (*Inferno,* Canto 25), the meeting with Beatrice (*Purgatorio,* Canto 30), the final glimpse of the Throne of God, where all space, time, and the cosmic universe itself is lost (*Paradiso,* Canto 33), will occur to anyone; the impotent defiance of Prometheus, at the close of the *Prometheus Bound;* the magnificent speech of Milton's Satan (*Paradise Lost,* Book II); Keats' *Ode to a Nightingale* and the *Ode to a Grecian Urn;* passages in Wordsworth's *Prelude,* one or two of Milton's sonnets, and several of Wordsworth's; poems like these will occur to any reader, for they have by tradition become standard. There is a very real joy, also, in discovering such work, even though it be rare, in our late poets. More than once one sees it in the poetry of Thomas Hardy, and especially in the *Dynasts.* I am not sure that some of the poetry of Edna St. Vincent Millay lacks it. There is something in this, more than meets the eye:[1]

> Euclid alone has looked on Beauty bare.
> Let all who prate of Beauty hold their peace,
> And lay them prone upon the earth and cease
> To ponder on themselves, the while they stare
> At nothing, intricately drawn nowhere
> In shapes of shifting lineage; let geese
> Gabble and hiss, but heroes seek release
> From dusty bondage into luminous air.
> O blinding hour, O holy, terrible day,
> When first the shaft into his vision shone
> On light anatomized! Euclid alone

[1] Published by Harper & Brothers, reprinted by permission of Miss Millay.

> Has looked on Beauty bare. Fortunate they
> Who though once only and then but far away,
> Have heard her massive sandal set on stone.

It is not to be wondered at that poetry which meets these qualifications requires something extraordinary in the reader. They are not experiences that come readily, for they are utterly removed from the rut of the present and the practical. For their fullest appreciation they require almost a special cult. Half-humorously, Sainte-Beuve thus lays down a prescription for a novitiate in great poetry.

> You will find it necessary. . . to withdraw from life which stuns the ear with its clamor, and to bar the door against it, to do as they did of old when they made ready to receive the mysteries, to devote a week to solitude, shadows, and silence, to undergo a regimen of ablutions, and to refrain from customary foods. Be sober, fast, and above all things do not read the morning newspapers.

The wisdom rises above humor in the last phrase. A person whose taste is confirmed by the morning newspaper, the current magazine, and the popular novel, can never hope to approach this mystery. It will take more than fasting and silence, and soul searching, to make over the mind that has been formed by this customary diet. Thus we would seem to have answered one question raised at the beginning of the chapter.

Greatness in prose will always be on a lower level than greatness in poetry. We have seen that what poetry can achieve by the magic of emotive language, imagery, rhythm, and the other devices of communication, prose must attain by the more pedestrian means of cumulative detail, and by exposition, example, illustration, and the other devices of rhetoric and logic. Prose can never hope to speak so intimately to the imagination of the reader, though in its more impassioned passages it may break over into the domain of poetry. Yet in its secret of greatness, prose is never essentially different from poetry.

Greatness in prose is not due to its preciseness in reference, that is, to its ability to describe its object with exact fidelity. If it

were due to this, we should look for our highest forms of prose in purely scientific treatises, or in accurate chronicles, or in the writing of psychologists. The value of these rarely rises above the narrow one of utility. For the scientific prose, one remembers with pleasure, contains such things as passages from Huxley or Darwin or the philosophical speculations of Schopenhauer or William James, which discover to us something more than the abstractions of science and philosophy.

It is possible now to suggest also an answer to the question of the secret of greatness in prose. Again one can find that the memorable prose sentence will supply the clue. There is, for example, this celebrated sentence from the conclusion of Sir Walter Raleigh's history: "O eloquent, just, and mighty Death! whom none could advise, thou hast persuaded; what none hath dared, thou hast done; and whom all the world hath flattered, thou only hast cast out of the world and despised; thou hast drawn together all the far-stretched greatness, all the pride, cruelty, and ambition of man, and covered it all over with these two narrow words, *Hic jacet.*" The parallel structure and the climax are obvious, also the magnificent apostrophe at the beginning, and the solemn epitaph at the end—these are only the externals of the form. What is much more subtle is the paradoxical crowding of ideas, each set forth with perfect imagery growing in intensity, as the final phrase brings all sharply to a focus in the solemn conclusion. This is almost poetry, as is all prose when it rises to heights of imaginative eloquence. Contrast with this a sentence of eloquence where the paradoxical nature of the ideas seems somewhat forced, and the imagery strained. It is from Macaulay's *Milton*. "He prostrated himself in the dust before his maker, but he set his foot upon the neck of his king."

Even a short sentence can have this magic quality of greatness, where an idea is presented sharply to us through the force of a paradox. Here, for example, is a gem from Sir Thomas Browne: "Life is a pure flame and we live by an invisible sun within us." There is imagery in this: but in the following from Bacon we have almost pure prose, and yet a sentence no less memorable:

"It is better to have no opinion of God at all, than such an opinion as is unworthy of him." Likewise this, from Emerson, "Great geniuses have the shortest biographies," though by no means as potent in its idea, has yet a perfect adequacy.

What is true of the sentence is true also, but in a larger way, of the longer passage. It is not alone the skill with which the authors of the sentences quoted and others like them select their ideas, but the manner in which they set them forth by combining variety; they thus produce a similar pleasing complexity in the response of the reader. For the pleasure in reading prose, as in reading poetry, is due in no small measure to the active participation of the reader's mind in an experience requiring a larger activity than in the ordinary routine of life. Bacon's essay *On Friendship,* to select an easy example, is much more, therefore, than a careful enumeration of the values of friends; like a poem, it produces a state of mind. In a real sense the essay is alive with emotive as well as intellectual values; and the conclusion leaves the mind with a fairly definable attitude as well as with clarified ideas. Yet Bacon's essay has a certain statistical coldness when compared with Montaigne's essay on the same subject in which he celebrated the merits of his dead friend La Boétie, for here the author was busy also with the record of his own joy and grief. Contrast this again with Emerson's transcendental prose on the same theme, with its changed attitude, for this has been colored by the temperament of a wholly different region and experience. For greatness in prose, like greatness in poetry, is the result of an experience, but here an experience chiefly with ideas, which the author would set forth in their complexity and emotive significance for the reader's larger understanding. But it is interesting to note that in all these cases prose proceeds with a deliberation in massing its ideas utterly foreign to the rapid directness of poetry. There is a sharper poignancy in David's lyric grief over Saul and Jonathan [1] than in any essay on friendship ever penned. There is, however, a larger scope and a more satisfying intelli-

[1] See p. 109.

gibility of the motives and significance of the experience in any of the prose essays.

So far, however, we have dealt chiefly with the shorter experiences, as they occur alone in lyric poetry, or as they stand out as isolated peaks in the mountain range of a longer poem. They are swiftly organized attitudes, the result of poignant impulses, and can be felt as stopping places on the longer journey of the epic or drama. Greater than these, however, are such longer poems as are efforts to communicate much more complex, and hence more valuable, experiences. And in this discussion of longer poetry we may well include the more extensive works also of prose. For in both of these the author begins with an "emotive attitude" that concerns a much larger fragment of human life; and if his attitude has value it will have a larger comprehensiveness, all other things being equal, than the value of a fragment or of a single lyric poem, or of the short prose essay. For it will have a larger significance to life and living.[1]

It is best perhaps to begin with an example. Milton's *Paradise Lost* was written by the poet professedly "to justify the ways of God to man." As such, it should have been a theological poem which found an adequate retribution in the fall of man, and glorified the promised sacrifice of the Saviour. In the course of the poem the evil nature of sin and the Devil should have been amply explored, so that, in the words of Dante for another professedly theological poem, the poet should have shown at least some large effort "to rescue the living from the state of damnation and to lead them to a state of bliss." And, with Milton, none can but agree that this would have been a most commendable and probably necessary burden for a great poet, convinced of the ugliness and danger of sin, and of the beauty of righteousness.

But one does not read twenty lines in the poem without discovering that the poet very early seems to have missed the way; and the farther we go, the more bewildered we become, until at the last it dawns upon us that the poet had an attitude toward the whole story of sin and redemption that was quite different from

[1] This is in answer, in part, to the expressionist theory that any perfect expression is unique, and hence its value in a scale of percentages is one hundred.

the thing that is ordinarily set forth in textbooks of orthodox theology. In reality, what the stern, yet deeply sympathetic, poet, whom people out of a lack of understanding pillory as a Puritan, strove to justify was not "the ways of God to man," but the ways of man to God. It is no wonder, then, that God and the Messiah, as the poet draws them, remain always cold and not a little unconvincing, and the angels not much more than flunkeys in livery tinted with a trifle of brightness and borrowed power; it is no wonder that Eve becomes, though in her degradation, the symbol of what "all men in a thousand years have come to desire," the *ewig weibliche;* and the Devil, the fallen archangel, though tarnished now and dim, for a time threatens to become the hero of a tragedy. One must overlook the overloaded and everlasting homilies—they loved three-hour sermons on exegesis in that century of fighters and theologians,—one must overlook obvious moralizing planted by the way as warning signs that the going is at the passenger's own risk. The poem is a justification of evil in this world, for in the possibility of evil and evil alone, is found the significance of man's choicest possession, character and responsible freedom.

These are the things that Milton, the humanist, is most interested in; and though it costs a journey to Hell and their evangelist at times seems to be the Devil himself, the imagination must follow. The greatest thing in the world is man, and the greatest thing in man, the only thing that makes him man, is free moral character. This is the attitude with which the poem begins; and it takes a cosmic poem, with the whole universe, including God and his angels, to give the experience scope.

Æschylus in his *Agamemnon* was telling no sordid story of a complicated love affair in which husbands and wives forgot their duties to each other in the stress of a world war that lasted not five but ten years. The slaying of Agamemnon by his guilty spouse Clytemnestra and her lover Ægisthus is no mere chronicle of shame such as we see paraded on the front sheets of sensational dailies. The Greek audience who sat through this play, as our forefathers sat under Milton's pulpit, knew the story of the family

of the old king as well as they knew their own. Agamemnon had come from violent and temperamental stock, with a family feud and the spilling of blood in each generation. But this king, now the glorious commander of the allied armies against Troy, was noted for his justice and magnanimity; and he had more than justified people's expectations. Troy had fallen and he returned victorious. But while he was winning laurels, the secret conspiracy was making ready. For before he left for the war he had been pressed by a decree of the gods to sacrifice his oldest daughter, Iphigenia; and this act of blood, for which he was not wholly responsible, alienated his wife. His cousin, Ægisthus, who already needed no inciting to the deed, became her paramour; and when the general returned the blow fell. Such is the story. But what Æschylus makes of the story is a pattern for life quite unique. It is Æschylus, the "soldier of Salamis," now in the days of peace and prosperity in Athens, pleading the most vivid plea ever urged against war and bloodshed, and the inveterate blood-feuds that lay waste a land. There has been no more powerful setting forth of the old truth that "blood will have blood"—no, not even in Macbeth. This is the emotive attitude of Æschylus in the tragedy of Agamemnon.

All great literature is thus a record of the varied patterns for life lived by the imaginations of the world's greatest men of experience. Milton once in his justification wrote that "he who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things ought himself to be a true poem." He must, at least in his imagination, live a good life, for out of it he will weave those tapestries of life that will be good for others. Nor is there a uniformity in these webs left us in great literature. Homer is not Sophocles, Plato is not Lucretius, Shakespeare is not Montaigne. From each we get something unique and exemplary. But in their concourse what richness is there for humanity!

A more complex attitude like this will require a large canvas for its adequate symbolisms. For into the forming of the attitudes have entered impulses roused by the experience of a whole life. There will need to be plot, and the gathering and careful selection

of a multitude of details; and there will be a larger use of the paradoxes, before which in real life we stand baffled, but which here must be blended into the pattern. There will be, above all, large room for that most potent of paradoxes, the impulse of irony. It would be difficult to forego the Fool in *Lear,* the drunken porter in *Macbeth,* and the grave-digger in *Hamlet;* without the irony of Mephistopheles there can be no Faust.

By plot, however, is not meant the plan or skeleton framework of incident or detail alone; rather, the growing organism in which all the parts have a vital correspondence with each other, and together give the whole its living character. It is, as Walter Pater describes it, "that architectural conception of work, which foresees the end in the beginning and never loses sight of it . . . a condition of literary art, which . . . I shall call the necessity of *mind* in style." It is essentially a creative power, and lends its convincing character and gives the impressiveness of inevitability to a work of art. "What distinguishes the artist from the mere amateur," wrote Goethe, "is 'architectonice' in the highest sense; that power of execution, which creates, forms, and constitutes; not the profoundness of single thoughts, not the richness of imagery, not the abundance of illustrations." These, as in a palace or cathedral, have their places, and are exceedingly valuable, but only as they are fused into the architectonic pattern of the whole; and it is only as this complete impression of unity is secured, a mental unity rather than logical, that the whole may be said to have structure.

In the selection of the details, what we call modern realism has tended to utilize more of what we have learned to call precise reference to objective fact, than did the older poets and novelists. But this is due only to our large ability to see and be interested in and to be stirred by objective fact, larger than at any other previous age because of our training in science.[1] In consequence these realistic details have for us the potency of favorite symbolism, which previously the reading public found in other symbols, such as poetic imagery and music. The old Greek pre-

[1] See Chapter XV, where this is treated in larger detail. Obviously, as in a psychological novel, the objective fact may be mental.

ferred the bas-reliefs of the epics and tragedies, and from their significant postures and situations got their plots. Their art in consequence is an art arrested at a moment of high seriousness and typical value. We, on the contrary, prefer to contemplate the moving quality of life itself and to read into that its significance for us. It is just, in consequence, to speak of much modern literature as having a more generous realism, but not as being more real. For this last can have reference only to the human convincingness of the inner experience. But whatever the symbolisms that are felt to be most effective, it is with the architectural planning of these into structure that the longer poems, dramas, and novels secure the final result, which is the attitude.

We can call this the poet's philosophy of life, his *Weltanschauung,* his effort at presenting a pattern for life. It is, in consequence, no small duty of criticism to discover in a poet's larger experience—or a novelist's, or a biograper's—this "way of looking at things," and to judge its value. For the greatest of poets and writers are those who have thus given us an adequate philosophy of life—a view of living that is at once both just and worthy.[1] An easy philosophy of life, such as one catches from mediocre romance or "uplift" novels, is not just, for it is obviously untrue. Sheer pessimism, on the other hand, that renounces human worth and would live down on all fours like a beast, is unworthy. For there have been philosophies of life, like that of the ancient poet Lucretius, which could with equanimity look the deadliest of evil in the face and proclaim human worth. Of our attitudes, that which is of greatest human worth is, perhaps, the one which can endure tragedy and yet not forget that even in his hour of deepest suffering man is most exalted.[2]

There is yet one question more that needs to be answered—greatness in literature has frequently been associated with greatness in the characters of literature. For example, it is felt that somehow the value of Homer is to be found in the characters of Achilles, Hector, and Ulysses; that of Shakespeare in his Ham-

[1] See Lascelles Abercrombie, *Greatness in Poetry,* where much the same theme is treated more in detail.
[2] See Chapter XII, "Tragedy."

let and Macbeth; of Meredith in his Diana. Against this theory is the curious passage in Aristotle's *Poetics,* that there can be tragedy, and I suspect he would have added also epic poetry, without character, but not without action. Yet today we can see the spectacle of a tragedy, like O'Neill's *Emperor Jones,* or a novel —any one of half a hundred might be mentioned, perhaps the most typical are by Marcel Proust—in which nearly the whole object is to explore the workings of character.

The answer to this puzzle is not so hard after one has read Aristotle's *Ethics.* To the Greek, character reveals itself and acquires significance only through action; and without some sort of action, whether internal and of the mind, or external, which, after all, always has its mental coördinate, there can be no character. Furthermore, to Aristotle, in particular, there can be no character save when the action is the result of a deliberate choice of the will. All this is clear enough, so far as it goes, especially when we remember that what Aristotle means by action is the architectural structure of the whole drama; that is, plot in its highest organic sense. But, as we generally use the word, there remains yet some obscurity, for I wish to draw a careful distinction between what we call character and what goes under the wider term, personality.

In a sense, all character, as we use the word, is a formula to explain some consistency in persons' actions. Theoretically, at least, we go by the old Greek ethical road, and associate it with the rational will, and thus speak of it as the result of a more or less disciplined education. It is thus we speak, when we analyze the character of Hamlet or Macbeth, of the poet's art, or the novelist's skill, in delineating character. When we so proceed, however, we are at times hard put to it to explain the inconsistencies of characters, when their actions are quite at odds with the formula. In this sense character is like a railway map, which any one can see at a glance always shows the line of shortest distance between two cities; though in reality we know that there are innumerable detours and curves which at times might seem to be leading us in any but a consistent direction.

On the other hand, personality is the sum of a person's attitudes toward life, many of which may be quite inconsistent with character, and be the result of anything other than discipline or choice. Thus personality acquires richness and depth and value as its free responses to life become more numerous, and as it approximates what we have called the good life; in other words, as it becomes more complex.[1]

The point of all this is that the nearer a great author comes to acquiring in a poem, drama, or novel, or even a biography or history, a valuable attitude toward life, or an adequate philosophy of life, the more likely he will be, as he tries to crystallize it about the symbols for communication in the plot, to create for us a concrete figure of a great personality. The personality thus becomes the symbol, concrete and vital, of the attitude of the author toward life and living. Thus the characters of Hamlet and Hector, of Agamemnon and Alceste, Don Quixote and Anna Karenina, are not studies in personality, or character, but are the living symbol of the author's reactions toward life—the crystallization of his experience.

For this reason also, in every great work of literature there will arise, somewhere, the compelling figure of personality which, like the magnetic current, gives direction to all the lesser details, and gives them meaning. It may be the figure of the author himself, as in Dante, Lucretius, Wordsworth and Montaigne; or it may be some imaginary personality, whose relation to the author will like a puzzle always lurk in obscurity, like Hamlet, Œdipus, or Satan. But whether the author himself or one of the children of his imagination, it will be an imaginative figure which has gathered into the scope of its experience all the complexities of life and given them a form and an appropriate attitude. It is the soul revealing itself in the structure of the experience. For personality is the recompense for living; and it is only by living

[1] There is, of course, another way of calling attention to the difference between character and personality, a distinction, however, which is not quite accurate. Character may be described as the dominance of one attitude or a number of allied attitudes. Personality is the fusing into an organic pattern of many and varied attitudes. Thus, Molière's "Bourgeois Gentilhomme," M. Jourdain, is a character, but Shakespeare's Macbeth is a personality.

that the poet is able to organize life into a personality.[1] "Personality is the richest boon granted to mankind"; as Goethe has written:

> Hochstes Glück der Erdenkinder
> Sei nur die Persönlichkeit.

There remains now to be answered only a phase of the question asked at the beginning of this chapter. Let us begin by a consideration of a passage from Longinus, which, in one form or another, has been endlessly repeated as a clue to greatness in literature.

> For that is really great which bears a *repeated* examination. . . . In general, consider those examples of sublimity to be fine and genuine which please *all* and *always*.

There are here in reality two tests of greatness. It is the argument that greatness is universally recognized, and that age and change of custom cannot stale its charm, but, on the contrary, serve only to reveal fresh values. These tests will have to be examined separately.

It is the old traditional argument that great poetry is a thing lifted above the mutations of time and space, an ideal enthroned, as it were, and beyond the limitations of the practical. Such is the interpretation usually given to these lines of Goethe:

> For Beauty in herself is blessed.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Ravished when young, courted when youth is flown—
> Enough, no bonds of time the poets own.[2]

But as there can be no language unless some can use it, so there can be no poetry unless some can experience it. So long as a poet's experience is communicable and the symbols serve, the poem remains adequate. The reasons for our inability to read

[1] This fact will explain why some literature "lives" and other "dies" a natural death, though at one time it may have had the signs of greatness. If the work gives only character, it will lose interest as interest in that particular type of character flags. At the same time, an interest in a living personality, if it be a great one, cannot die, for each age will discover in it something new. Contrast Dickens and Thackeray, Shakespeare and Ben Jonson.

[2] *Faust*—II—Swanwick tr.

easily much of the literature of another time and place is that the fund of experience held in common has dwindled. And it is correspondingly true that many writers who had a value for their time are inaccessible to us today without a large preliminary preparation on our part.

How is it, then, that the perpetual charm of Homer, of Lucretius, of Marcus Aurelius, of Montaigne, has seemed to increase, if anything, rather than lessen? I think already we have the answer. The experiences of these great men are so varied, they present so many points of approach, have so wide a scope, and touch life at so many points, that is, they are so essentially human, that human nature can never get away from them. It is for precisely this reason that they are being perpetually re-lived for each age by a newer and fresher criticism. One would think, for example, that Homer, with all that has been written and said about him, should long ago have begun to yield diminishing returns. On the contrary, however, each new age finds something new in him, that is, something that fits its special needs a little more snugly. For this reason a lecture on Homer delivered five hundred years ago by the critic and poet, Politian, seems futile today, for the humanist saw in the poet only what the early Renaissance was interested in. It is a curious question, but an unanswerable one, to ask what our descendants in a hundred years will be finding in Shakespeare. There is one safe answer—it will not be exactly what critics today are pointing out as his chief virtue. For we in our turn have moved away from what Coleridge, the most vital critic of his day, found as the secret of the charm of *Hamlet* and *Lear*.

In the case of some of the great writers, each succeeding age has to make a large allowance for what we may call their emotional background. Chaucer carries with him as an aura the atmosphere of mediæval chivalry and romance. Dante can never be quite understood without the power on our part to sense the charm of the sweeter aspects of asceticism. Milton reeks of the Hebrew Bible, its imagery and rhythms as well as its unyielding ethical convictions. Sometimes these local interests in lesser men

so obscure their originality that today they are difficult to read. But not so the great poets, for like huge peaks they so soar above the mists and clouds that hide the foothills that their outlines are always visible. In this sense great literature may be said to live always.

For the same reason it will bear repeated examination. Each new visit discovers something new in the complexity of the experience. A lesser work early reveals its chief value, and on succeeding visits, as to a shallow friend, one tires of the monotony of what once may have been a charm. For this reason a wise person never speaks all his heart even to a friend, for true friendship is a perpetual and mutual voyage of discovery. A great poem also has this opportunity for the unexpected. One never comes to it twice in exactly the same mood; and it, in its universality, has a new facet for each mood.[1]

But how can great literature be universal in its appeal and always please all? In other words, how can a person whose mental equipment is poor, that is, whose organization for life is inadequate, or on a low level, hope to rise to the heights of Shakespeare or Dante? There is only one answer to this—he cannot rise to the heights unless he make himself over. But nearly all great literature offers approaches also on lower levels; like life itself, it has its heights and heights. To one a trip through the Inferno of Dante may be merely a curious Cook's tour among strange human monsters in a grotesque foreign land. To these it will have the level of the Doré engravings of Dante—interesting and perhaps in an elementary way edifying, but not the real Dante. I suspect, likewise, that most of the contemporaries of Shakespeare saw in his tragedies only the bloody spectacles their "tragedy of blood" had endeared to them, only done more skillfully. And the fact that Athens in not much more than fifty years had Æschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes, not to mention the lesser poets, hardly proves that every Athenian citizen was a just critic of the richest drama the world has yet

[1] One might well in this place suggest the warning of Longinus to the literary innovator of his age: "In what spirit will each succeeding age listen to me who have written thus?"

afforded. I suspect Aristophanes' picture of Demos is overdrawn, but Demos he was, and Demos he is still, even in this Western world after the lapse of more than two millenniums.[1]

We cannot close more appropriately than by a quotation from that wisest of Frenchmen, Montaigne. It will, I think, give the final twist to the answer we have been trying to formulate to the quotation at the beginning of this chapter. "To judge of things high and mighty, there is need of a mind of the same scope. Otherwise we attribute to them the pettiness that is our own. A straight arrow always appears crooked in the water. It isn't the fact that you see it that counts, but how you see it." Longinus likewise had much the same formula: "the judgment of literature is the long-delayed reward of much endeavor."

For judgment as an appraisal of value depends first upon a full appreciation of the author's work, and that is no less than to understand it upon its highest level. Only when the full complexity of the experience has been felt, the significance of the writer's outlook on life, and the richness of the personality in which this is crystallized, is the critic ready to pronounce judgment. But for a literary judgment there must be standards, and these come from literature itself as a panorama of life. For a work of supreme genius there will be necessary a standard equally convincing. Thus it is that all lesser standards seem futile when used to test the great. Matthew Arnold suggests the appeal to memorable passages the author supplies as samples of the purity of his ore. These are excellent, so far as they go, as an indication of what one may expect if one mines diligently; but as tests of the quality of the whole work, they go no farther than themselves and their like. Shakespeare is not to be compared with Homer or Virgil or Milton by short extracts torn from the context. Rather the works as a whole must be set against each other, and their relative greatness viewed as one judges the height of a mountain. And the mind that would judge must be capable of adventuring the heights. "To judge of poets is only the faculty

[1] This is merely to say that art was not democratic in antiquity; that when Longinus says great art pleases all, he by no means has tabloid mentality in mind.

of poets." There is also the other side to the picture, the works of the great are our only invariable standard. This has been said once and for all by Longinus. "Still more effectual will it be to suggest this question to our thought, 'What sort of hearing would Homer, had he been present, or Demosthenes have given?'"

Chapter VIII

MINOR OR MEDIOCRE

CHARM OF MINOR POETRY—SPECIALIZATION—LARGER INTIMACY—A RELAXATION—THE MEDIOCRE—SECRET OF MEDIOCRITY—INSINCERITY—DANGER OF MEDIOCRITY—MEDIOCRE ATTITUDES—MEDIOCRITY AND SOCIAL HABITS—DANGER OF STANDARDIZATION.

I FEAR we did not quite do full justice on another page to a remark by Lemaître. It was during the discussion of impressionism. The passage in part was this: "The thing which gives us the greatest pleasure or does the most good is not always from works best known or hallowed by tradition, but some book less celebrated, which speaks more intimately and goes far deeper." There is a world of pious truth in this, far more than critics have been willing at times to accept. For in their eagerness to promote the cause of the best they lose sight of the fact that the best is not always available, and that the good, even though it may be minor, has also a real value.

For example, how many sincere souls in grief have been refreshed by the gentle optimism of the Twenty-third Psalm:

> The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.
> He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
> He leadeth me beside the still waters,
> He restoreth my soul. . . .
> Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
> I will fear no evil; for Thou art with me:
> Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me.

One hesitates in these matters, but this is not what we have defined as great poetry, for it lacks that imaginative scope and

that richness of variety that we have come to associate with a great experience. This is not the calmness of attitude that follows in the wake of a great storm, but the calm in a region where storms never come. The "valley of the shadow of death" and the "enemies" are impotent to disturb the peace that flourishes in these pastures and beside these still waters. Yet the poem has depth, and a charm from which no one wishes to escape.

Like this, though perhaps of not quite so high an order, are many of our excellent church hymns. Toplady's *Rock of Ages,* Newman's *Lead Kindly Light,* or Addison's great hymn, or Luther's *Ein feste Burgh ist unser Gott*—they are perennial favorites, and rightly.

In the previous chapter we found that the very highest type of poetry was not specialized to any single dominant mood or interested state of mind, and that it was this quality that gave it its peculiar impersonal quality. With this lower level of experience, on the other hand, we at once discover that there is a definite variety of mental readiness required to accept the poem, a single or interested state of mind, which will find the experience congenial. Let me illustrate. A state of mind that is glad to accept Henley's *Invictus* would find the cheerful resignation of the Psalm just quoted somewhat pusillanimous; and the psalmist would in turn call Henley blasphemous. Indeed, his poem has in it a bit of the wrong-headedness that caused the old Greek hero Ajax some trouble, if one may take the old legend seriously. But that we may make the comparison, I quote the poem:[1]

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbow'd.

[1] Reprinted by permission of Charles Scribner's Sons.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds and shall find me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

Again, Shelley's *Skylark* is specialized to a mood of quiet melancholy. It lacks the vigor of the *Ode to the West Wind* which, though pervaded by much the same melancholy, is not subdued to the single mood, for more than one stanza lifts us quite out of the mood of acquiescence into one of vigorous action:

Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:
What if my leaves are falling like its own!
The tumult of thy mighty harmonies
Will take from both a deep autumnal tone,
Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, spirit fierce,
My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one.
Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!
And, by the incantation of this verse,
Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
Be thro' my lips to unawakened earth
The trumpet of a prophecy! O, wind,
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

This is great poetry. Contrast with it the single prevailing impulse of the *Skylark* in its last stanza:

Teach me half the gladness
That thy brain must know,
Such harmonious madness
From my lips would flow,
The world would listen then, as I am listening now.

Yet—the *Skylark* is a greater favorite with many people.

But against this mood of the *Skylark* place the joyous abandon of fantasy in Shelley's *Cloud*. I quote two stanzas:

That orbèd maiden with white fire laden,
Whom mortals call the moon,
Glides glimmering o'er my fleece-like floor,
By the midnight breezes strewn;
And wherever the beat of her unseen feet,
Which only the angels hear,
May have broken the woof of my tent's thin roof,
The stars peep behind her and peer;
And I laugh to see them whirl and flee,
Like a swarm of golden bees,
When I widen the rent in my wind-built tent,
Till the calm rivers, lakes, and seas,
Like strips of the sky fallen thro' me on high,
Are each paved with the moon and these.

I bind the sun's throne with a burning zone,
And the moon's with a girdle of pearl;
The volcanoes are dim, and the stars reel and swim,
When the whirlwinds my banner unfurl.
From cape to cape with a bridge-like shape,
Over a torrent sea,
Sunbeam-proof, I hang like a roof,
The mountains its columns be.
The triumphal arch thro' which I march
With hurricane, fire, and snow,
When the powers of the air are chained to my chair,
Is the million-colored bow;
The sphere-fire above its soft colors wove,
While the moist earth was laughing below.

These two moods are quite incompatible, and yet both are very real and also valuable. But it is hard to enjoy both at the same time.

But I think we have found a reason for the generally avoided truth, that minor poetry as a rule finds readier readers and a larger,

though perhaps secret, favor, even with the best, than the greatest of great poetry. It is a more familiar friend that is able to respond far more readily to our particular needs. Like such poetry, we, too, are specialized in our moods, and these the poems with the particular quality of experience we desire can easily minister to. With this poetry we can also, in a measure, play the *Juif errant,* as Sainte-Beuve puts it, voyaging in discovery of the particular thing that at the moment we may wish to call our own. It is poetry rather more for mental relaxation of the better sort, than for the mental effort that is required of a great experience. In this respect also, it is like a wise and comfortable and genial friend, who knows one's crotchets and has the admirable quality of tact. He will give us something better, perhaps far better, than we ourselves possess, but he will not require too much of us, nor insult us with his too great superiority.

With reading fixed at this level, it is possible also to understand how there will occur the paradox of a constantly shifting taste, which threatened to play such havoc with any theory of value. As no two persons more than approximate in their personal equations, it will always remain doubtful if they can at any one moment enjoy alike the same minor poem; for this enjoyment means a readiness to accept its peculiar experience. If at the moment I prefer Shelley's *Cloud* or the Twenty-third Psalm, no easy mental discipline is going to make me respond whole-heartedly to the *Ode in Dejection* or to the Penitential Psalm. The horizon is for the present too clear and the sense of peace too secure to allow atrabiliar motives to enter and create their disturbance. How much more likely will it be that two people will differ in their enjoyment of any one minor poem?

In this sense, taste is a thing about which dispute is irrelevant. For good minor poetry, or good minor literature, is always a variety of mental relaxation of a valuable sort. Its power is not so much creative as recreative. Without it we should be bound helpless in the rut of common experience from which we wish to escape, knowing vaguely what we want but without the means

of lifting ourselves out. Or, again to use the figure of Shelley, without it the mask of familiarity which common experience wears is never torn off and its magic unfamiliarity revealed.

We have all stood enthralled before the spectacle of a sunset lighting up the vast billows of cloud; we have all stood at eager longing before the long reaches of ocean. But it is the poet, and the poet alone, who can adequately express the urge of impulse that strives for adequate satisfaction. If he gives an experience that brings the whole soul of man into harmony with the wonder of the visible universe, it is great poetry, and in its range transcends our immediate personal interest.

> And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
> The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
> The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
> Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
> And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
> Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
> As dreams are made on; and our little life
> Is rounded with a sleep.

But if his range is not so ambitious, if the experience reaches only the expression of a single dominant impulse, or several similar impulses, the poem, though precious, still remains minor.

I must go down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the sky,
And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by;
And the wheel's kick and the wind's song and the white sail's shaking,
And a gray mist on the sea's face, and a gray dawn breaking.

I must go down to the seas again, for the call of the running tide
Is a wild call and a clear call that may not be denied;
And all I ask is a windy day with the white clouds flying,
And the flung spray and the blown spume, and the sea-gulls crying.

I must go down to the seas again, to the vagrant gypsy life,
To the gull's way and the whale's way, where the wind's like a whetted knife;

And all I ask is a merry yarn from a laughing fellow-rover,
And quiet sleep and a sweet dream when the long trick's over.[1]

But because the attitude of the second poem is so personal, so full of the longing of the poet himself, it has an intimacy and a familiar charm which may even for some be lacking in the greater poem. Its very lack of complexity is its personal charm, for it is downright in its simplicity, like lesser humanity itself. Or to change the figure, we do not always desire to worship in the great cathedral with its dim spaces and mighty organ; there do come times, and not seldom, when the familiar meeting-house, with its homely furniture and simple music, speaks far more intimately.

But there is a variety of poetry and prose, not uncommon, whose effect is all bad; and because it is not instantly recognizable, all the more dangerous. We can best begin by an illustration. Here is a poem that has had many admirers:

Children of night! unfolding meekly, slowly,
To the sweet breathings of the shadowy hours,
When the dark-blue heavens look softest and most holy,
And glow-worm light is in the forest bowers;
To solemn things and deep,
To spirit-haunted sleep,
To thoughts, all purified
From earth, ye seem allied,
O dedicated flowers!

Ye, from the gaze of crowds your beauty veiling,
Keep in dim vestal urns the sweetness shrined;
Till the mild moon, on high serenely sailing,
Looks on you tenderly and sadly kind.
So doth love's dreaming heart
Dwell from the throng apart,
And but to shades disclose
The inmost thought, which glows
With its pure life entwined.

[1] "Sea Fever," from *Poems*, vol. i, copyright 1925, reprinted by permission of The Macmillan Company.

Shut from the sounds wherein the day rejoices,
To no triumphant song your petals thrill,
But send forth odours with the faint, soft voices
Rising from hidden streams, when all is still.
So doth lone prayer arise
Mingling with secret sighs,
When grief unfolds, like you,
Her breast, for heavenly dew
In silent hours to fill.

At first reading *The Night Blooming Flowers* by Mrs. Hemans has not a little to commend it as a good variety of minor poetry, and the closing half of each of the three stanzas, with its solemn grandeur, has more than a reminiscence in it of Wordsworth. One is almost convinced—but the means employed betray the experience. "Solemn things and deep"—"dreaming heart dwell from the throng apart"—"prayer arise mingling"—"heavenly dew"—these phrases are potent, but their potency is not due to the richness of the experience that prompts the poem, but to well-known and perfectly predictable responses we carry around with us as a legacy of the Wordsworthian manner of looking at nature. And at last we are compelled to conclude that the experience is not quite genuine, that the author is not causing in us also a genuine experience, but that we are simply responding automatically to what has become a habit. The impulses which the poet here arouses are not real, but simulacra, having the thrill but lacking entirely any conviction.

In a much cruder way, the same thing may easily be detected in an unskillful or insincere speech or sermon, where well-known phrases or quotations or associations are used to call up the states of mind we have been long accustomed to associate with them, while the experience that in reality we are receiving is a very shallow one, if it be an experience at all. It is particularly noticeable in the potent imagery of the Hebrew Scriptures, when dragged into an utterly irrelevant discourse so as to make the thing flow with supposed vitality.

Our response to Mrs. Heman's poem is something quite too

easy for the variety of experience the poem pretends to be; and its ease is due to reminiscences instantly available of other and greater nature poetry. These are here called up by means of well-known and imitated rhythmic patterns, imagery, and allusion. This is not minor poetry, but what has been called, and appropriately perhaps—at least we shall continue to use the phrase—mediocre poetry. We shall see later that it is very dangerous.

Quite different from the poem by Mrs. Hemans, but easier to classify, is this by Walt Whitman, a favorite, one will have to confess, with a large number of readers:

O Captain! my Captain! our fearful trip is done,
The ship has weather'd every rack, the prize we sought is won,
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,
While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring;
  But O heart! heart! heart!
    O the bleeding drops of red,
      Where on the deck my Captain lies,
        Fallen cold and dead.

O Captain! my Captain! rise up and hear the bells:
Rise up—for you the flag is flung—for you the bugle trills,
For you bouquets and ribbon'd wreaths—for you the shores a-crowding,
For you they call, the swaying mass, their eager faces turning;
  Here Captain! dear father!
    This arm beneath your head!
      It is some dream that on the deck
        You've fallen cold and dead.

My Captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still,
My father does not feel my arm, he has no pulse nor will;
The ship is anchor'd safe and sound, its voyage closed and done,
From fearful trip the victor ship comes in with object won;
  Exult, O shores, and ring, O bells!
    But I with mournful tread
      Walk the deck my Captain lies,
        Fallen cold and dead.

At first reading it is difficult not to feel its emotional potency. The subject alone, the death of a great president at a national crisis, has the power to thrill us without the aid of a poet's imagery and rhythm; the very name, Lincoln, has now the incantation of a myth. And in the rhythmic periods of a skillful reader this is just the kind of thing that brings huge applause from any dinner club. But this very fact should give us pause. Great poetry does not usually show all its goods in the window, and a great experience does not always come off with a blaze of emotional pyrotechnics. But an objector might insist that Whitman loved Lincoln, and the experience was genuine enough for him. The reply is not difficult. Granted, and the sign of it is best seen in a genuine poem, *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed;* but here a quite obvious and different motive may also be caught—to exploit the emotive values of the experience in the symbolism of the commonplace.

Let us glance at a few of the phrases. The familiar imagery of the returning vessel, the exulting cries of the people on shore, the trill of the bugle, the thunder of the bells, the garlands of victory, and the fallen, bleeding figure of the Captain. All of this only too readily calls up the response, for the rhythm and imagery are of a character to stir an easy and predictable response without the need of an experience to give them value. It is the thrill of tragedy without its presence, no more to be trusted than the ardent love-making of a Don Juan. To put it in other words, the poem has been admirably staged, its scenic possibilities, and its lighting have been looked into by a master, but the action does not quite ring true. It is not a genuine sorrow that the reader experiences, but a sentimental display of a not unpleasant shallow emotionalism. To the person capable of a genuine sorrow the poem at once displays its inadequacy.

It might not be inappropriate to recall here two more popular favorites to show their essential shortcomings. In many anthologies one comes across Kipling's *L'Envoi* beginning, "When earth's last picture is painted." There is in this an apparent cosmic greatness that should disarm criticism, a gospel of rewards for

struggling genius and modest aspiration, and a promise of achievement that should be a source of glorious comfort to patient mediocrity. But the thing ought to be suspect, for it has all the air of a celestial promoter and the convincingness of high pressure salesmanship of lots in the New Jerusalem. Carruth's *Each in His Own Tongue* exploits the cosmic universe, and in four short stanzas finds the complete experience of God in all the processes of nature and the human heart. Milton tried this in a poem of over eight thousand lines, and got only to the Devil; Shakespeare probed the human heart and found Iago's and Edmund's as well as Lear's and Hamlet's. We ought to be suspicious when recipes for such panaceas are hawked about in popular poetry, for we are only too ready with our credulity, and lend ourselves to the poet without asking the previous question. For such experiences turn out to be not experiences at all, but a call upon perfectly familiar responses we have been trained and retrained to make. The whole issue is utterly conventional. It is not at all the thrill of an experience that we have been having, but a stirring up of latent responses that on the slightest provocation we are all able to make, but poetically or vitally of no more value than the purr of a cat when even a stranger strokes its chin.

And the final test of either of these poems, and of the large family to which they belong, is to read them aloud a few times, and watch the rapid fall of the emotive barometer. There will come a time, and to many very quickly, when they will produce nothing but utter weariness. Even a cat will weary of chin stroking.

There is also danger of mediocrity incident to prose, an easy mastery of the obvious, for example, that frequently creeps into the utterance of public men and others, whose words multitudes hang upon. This is no less deceptive and no less difficult to detect than its sister vice in poetry; and because of the wide distribution of the printed word, far more insidious in its ultimate effect.

The danger of mediocre poetry is that it appeals to current attitudes that are the result, not of experience, but of social habit or convention. How many people understand the attitude of

retiring asceticism in *The Night Blooming Flowers;* how many feel the real grief the *My Captain* is supposed to evoke? But as in the large complexity of life today there are more of these loose, current attitudes ready for exploitation, the danger of mediocre literature, and especially poetry, is far more real and insidious than at any other time. For this leads to a stoppage of experience and to the communication of an attitude without the intervention of an experience. For most careless readers it is easier, of course, and hence also more delightful than a real experience, because by it one can call up the state of mind without having to go to the trouble of creating it. Is it any wonder that Goethe wrote:

Was man gewohnt war, bleibt ein Paradies.
"What one is accustomed to remains his Paradise."

If the legend is to be credited, our first father found Paradise a place with no responsibility for work; we can get back to it, in part at least, in mediocre poetry. It is such cheap and easy mediocrity that is the halo to the poetry of Edgar Guest.

There is the same danger in mediocre art, in mediocre fiction and drama, and especially, because of its popularity, in the mediocre "movie." This fact will explain the huge popularity of the popular fiction magazine that exploits the cheap and easy and fallacious attitudes toward life, and also of the easy, conventionally "nice" or "nasty" situations of the "movie," and the vulgar simplicity or tawdriness of the poster art.

Nor is the cheap, Babbitt optimism the chief offender, the attitude that at one time was better described by the word Philistinism. This is, or was, common enough, and has been long the favorite gibe of the so-called "intellectuals," who, armed with a frank cynicism, went forth to do battle against American purblind provincialism and its favorite idols of the market place. Until now, this new intellectual attitude of superiority has become also "fixed" in many places, and as cheap and easy as the idol it strove to overthrow.

The truth is there is nothing in the world more common than

mediocrity. This is what Lemaître meant when in his defense of snobs he exclaimed, "Humanity is made up of more of the dead than of the living." Or, in another place, "The mediocre are always in a majority; it is really necessary that there should be the mediocre." I presume, here, the critic is contemplating the calamity that might follow if everyone stopped accepting attitudes and began thinking for himself. There might be some inconvenience in such an eventuality, to the critics of mediocrity. To Romain Rolland, "nothing is more international than mediocrity." And it would be easily possible to go on indefinitely to describe and pillory the infinite variety of *"des sots"* whose names we can discover to be nothing more nor less than mediocrity—people who take their attitudes easily, without troubling themselves about experience, people whose minds are "fixed" and can rarely rise to a spontaneous action.

In the age of neo-classicism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the age of common sense and refinement, mediocrity showed itself in an artificiality of manner, which was the abundant sign of lack of soundness; the thing that Racine could do with exquisite naturalness, in the hands of his imitators became servility. Hence the vivid success of a movement back to nature led by Rousseau in France and Wordsworth in England. It was Rousseau who said that he would rather be a man of "a feeling heart" than a man of sense, for a feeling heart, if it truly feels, is at least not more than one remove from reality. But in the age that followed, "feeling" or "sentiment" also became a fixed attitude and degenerated into sentimentality, a wash from which we have not yet, in spite of the realism of our sciences, entirely rescued ourselves. And now that our preoccupation with science and its indifference is turning us to a new cynical aloofness toward sentimentality and even sentiment, it is not to be wondered at that again the orthodox mediocre attitude seems on the point of changing its nature and giving us an orgy of cheap pessimism and cynicism. It is spuriously attractive, because it looks to be a hard-won attitude, and spiced by a superior intellectual subtlety, in contrast with the flabby ethical and sentimental

optimism of the mediocre fifty years ago. Nor is this short history of mediocrity of the past three centuries unique in the history of thought. An age of creative freedom finds its mediocre counterpart in cheap bombast, and one of conservative reaction and refined good taste in as cheap servility. There is not much to choose between this Scylla and this Charybdis of literature.

The question is appropriate to ask: What would a cinema producer today do with the tragedy of *Lear* or *Agamemnon,* if he were asked to revive the story for a modern audience? Or perhaps, to be more fair—for who so far among the producers of this new art has shown any large vision beyond the box-office receipts,—what would a modern stage contriver, if he felt free to take liberties with the plots—as did both Shakespeare and Æschylus—do with these stories to bring them down to date? For mediocrity can never endure the attitude of tragedy. It is the one attitude that is incommunicable by any reference to mere social consciousness or habit. It must be lived.

It is true that as social life becomes more and more stable these conventional social habits become more and more fixed, and more numerous. They are short-cuts to communication and are the background of the social consciousness. They become standard, and by them we regulate the conscience and morals of society. In effect, the whole effort of the social group is thus toward standardization as a potent means of preserving order and insuring mass action. Usually we are not aware of these unseen forces that so relentlessly mold our lives, until in a moment of crisis, as during the late war, we see how skillfully they can be manipulated by ingenious contrivers. And the press and the popular publications have now infinitely strengthened their bonds.

But it is in the very strength of these powers that make for standardization that lies the greatest danger for literature. A Greek once said, "Let me write the songs of a people and you can make their laws." But if the laws and conventions and consciousness of a people once become "fixed," there will be difficulty in a poet's getting his songs heard. For great literature tends to do precisely the opposite, to "unfix" the mind and encourage

spontaneous movement. A great literature, as well as art, then, requires a large social differentiation, a rich variety in the life and habits of a people, and fluidity of a people's thought. Against this is always the oppressive tyranny of successful mediocrity, for mediocrity, whether it be in high places or in low, is always tyrannous. It fears the insult of superiority.

If a literature merely confirms people in the routine of their attitudes, it will but deepen the ruts and make escape still more difficult. This is the argument against much of our so-called new realism. It may be exceedingly efficient in its technique and have amazing insight into the workings of men's minds. But it rarely tells us things that we do not already know, or gives us experiences otherwise unavailable. For the richness of a book lies in the complexity and depth and newness of a reader's response, not alone in its more adequate technique.

Finally, it is equally obvious that there is a very real danger in what may be called too uniform a literary diet. The dietitian has gone a long way in helping us to understand how to avoid the penalty of indigestion. But little effort seems to be made to train a corps of literary dietitians, for that in fact is what critics should be. For we need a varied mental food as urgently as a varied alimentary. There is a mental hygiene as vital, perhaps even more vital, than the purely physical. A uniform reading promotes only a limited number of free responses, which after a time become automatic. And though the pleasure may remain, it is one unaccompanied by any positive value. There will always be this danger, if reading be indulged in only as a species of mental recreation. There is the pleasure, but behind it the mental response, and here we must look for value.

Chapter IX

POETRY AND RELIGION

THE RELIGIOUS ATTITUDE—ITS RANGE—THE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND POETRY—LOVE OF NATURE—THE COSMIC EXPERIENCE—LOVE OF HUMANITY—INDIVIDUAL EXPANSION—THE PERSONAL DEITY—THE EXPERIENCE OF COMPENSATION — TRANSCENDENTALISM — A POETIC REALITY — ITS VALUE—POETRY AND CREED—POETRY AND PHILOSOPHY—MYTHS—THE VALUE OF DOGMA—THE SCOPE OF POETIC CREEDS.

THERE is a passage in Lucretius which has long been a favorite. I shall have to content myself with a prose translation:

'Tis sweet, when the seas are tossed by violent winds, to view from land the toils of others, not that there is pleasure in seeing others in distress, but that man is glad to know himself secure. 'Tis pleasant, also, to look without peril, on the mighty contests of war; but nothing is sweeter than to reach those calm, unruffled temples, raised by the wisdom of philosophers, whence thou mayest look down on poor mistaken mortals, wandering in life's devious ways, some resting their fame on genius, or priding themselves on birth, day and night toiling anxiously to rise to high fortune and sovereign power.

Something of the same present detachment is caught, but this time with a far different attitude, in these lines by Pascal:

When I consider the shortness of my life, lost between two infinities, the little space which I fill and the only one I see, a chasm in the infinite depths of space which I know not and which knows not me, I am terrified and amazed to see myself here rather than elsewhere, for there is not the slightest reason for here and not elsewhere, or for now and not at another time. Who has placed me here? By whose plan and warrant was this place and this time ordained for me? The silence eternal of these infinite spaces terrifies me.

Another mood, quite different in every respect save its detachment, moved Dante to put these lines into his vision of Paradise:

> Insensate care of mortals, what defects
> Are in those syllogisms which make thee beat
> Thy wings to what is base! One went his way
> In the pursuit of laws, another was
> For aphorisms, and for the priesthood one,
> And one would reign by sophisms and by force,
> One plunder, one in business of the state,
> One in the pleasures of the flesh involved
> Was wearying himself, and one was giving
> Himself to idleness,—while disengaged
> From all these things I was with Beatrice
> Above in Heaven thus gloriously received.

In all these experiences the poet or thinker rises, for the moment, above all transient conditions of time and space, and has a glimpse of all nature, all life, all human affairs, in their eternal relationships to the past, present, and the future. To Lucretius the vision brings a peace, a philosophic calm, that is the result of the deeper knowledge. To Pascal it brings the shudder of a naked soul lost in the abyss between two unexplored and unexplorable infinities. To Dante comes the joy of perfect knowledge in the final attainment by the human soul of its native heaven. Yet for all it is the same experience, that of the personality for the moment in a state of accord with the totality of the cosmic universe; and, for the want of a more definite term, we shall call this attitude fundamental to religion.

There is a difference, to be sure, between the attitudes of Lucretius, Pascal, and Dante. To the Latin poet there comes the sense of calm, philosophic superiority, the peace of perfect consciousness of man's power and limitations; he has definitely renounced the hope of discovering somewhere a higher power to which he may flee for refuge from the discomfort of the present. Philosophical knowledge is his God, and this knowledge has made him free in a subdued universe. Pascal, on the other hand,

can find no such human comfort. His soul, a homeless spirit, can find no rest nor any meaning in the chaos of empty eternities, so he flees for comfort and rest to a God he must somewhere, somehow discover, who shall give direction to what else is directionless. But Pascal's spirit is always, like Pascal's God, a trifle insecure, unless buttressed ever by a pious hope and a fervent faith; a quite different attitude from the calm certainty of Lucretius. But to Dante, the mediævalist, nothing in the world is quite so certain as the fact of the higher world of God and heaven; he is there with Beatrice, the spirit of divine revelation; and there he enjoys not alone the peace of knowledge, but the perfect bliss of attainment. In a word, to Lucretius the religious vision brings peace, to Pascal horror and hope, to Dante a rhapsody of bliss.

One thing more, these poetic attitudes are not the result of a reasoned demonstration of the truths of religion. They are rather outbursts of pure poetry, lyrical insights, as it were, into the meaning of things, the result of experience, and the guiding attitude for new experience. Let us call them, if the term be not too misleading, concrete philosophies of life, the poetic solution, if we please, of the whole problem of living. They are not, however, abstract systems—though they are, as we shall see, translatable into abstract formulas, perhaps to their own loss—but rich with the concrete value of a vivid experience.

All great poetry, and a great deal of the minor, is full of these concretions of what we may call varieties of the religious experience. They may be on a high level, or on a plane within the reach of even a mediocre mind. And a great deal of the reading which gives the very highest and most valuable pleasure is of this variety. For the religious experience, as we shall see, is not limited or specialized, as we commonly suppose, nor confined to a certain rare aspect of life, but may be, on the other hand, one of the most generous, most available, and most welcome of all mental phenomena. Nor is it, except remotely, connected with the experience of church, dogma, or creed. Nor are the liturgies of the church designed for any other purpose than to arouse and

exploit by their symbolisms the well-known and simple attitude of religious communion; and as such they are in reality merely short-cuts to poetic experience. Only to the poet, as well as to many others, the attitude comes without the ministration of the church—as it did in the beginning, and as it will always do.[1] Nor should we be surprised that there is a type of mind that can easily afford to dispense with the liturgical symbolism, and prefers the personal and direct route.

It is with this thought in mind that Santayana writes: "That the intuitions of religion are poetical, and that in such intuitions poetry has its ultimate functions, are truths of which both religion and poetry become more conscious the more they advance in refinement and profundity." In their higher aspects, religion and poetry do not only minister to each other, they seem to unite. It will be interesting to explore this intimate relation.

On its lower levels [2] this religious attitude of poetry shows itself in an intimate love of nature, a sheer joy in participating in the immediate life of material objects. There it explores and exploits a bond, as it were, that unites man with the spirit of life that animates nature. This is not wholly an attitude of reflection, nor one that seems to hold any philosophy beyond the purely naïve joy in being alive, and having such an ally to share our joys and griefs. Wordsworth's

> To me the meanest flower that blows can give
> Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears,

is a bit of this naïve philosophy of life. Pippa's song on a spring morning, with its redundant "God's in his Heaven, all's right with the world," is the same. There is nothing mystical in this joy, for children, as well as those older, can feel its urge. It is no more than a conviction that this world, for joy or for pain, is a good place to live in, and the world itself a source of comfort and trust. Bryant's lines *To a Waterfowl,* Burns' poem *To a Moun-*

[1] The reader is referred to Professor George Santayana's book on *Poetry and Religion,* Chapter I, where the value of church liturgies is discussed in full, and the danger to a church which rests its appeal purely on intellectual dogma.

[2] Obviously by this I do not mean the earliest or most primitive.

tain Daisy, barring perhaps the moralizing at the end, are precisely of this nature.

> Cauld blew the bitter-biting north
> Upon thy early, humble birth;
> Yet cheerfully thou glinted forth
> Amid the storm,
> Scarce rear'd above the parent-earth
> Thy tender form.

In this, nature, or rather the particular object in nature, becomes a symbol, and its worth is not for itself but for what of human significance it carries. Or to put it another way, we love the daisy and the waterfowl, not as objects in nature separate from man, but because for a moment they become symbols of man's own existence; and thus nature acquires meaning and warm intelligibility. It is an early, and perhaps easy, going forth of the spirit of man and finding in nature a close companionship and consolation and joy. And for this reason, because it carries man beyond his narrow isolation, and finds other compensations, it is essentially religious.[1]

Greater than this, and, as we have seen, a sign of an experience of almost universal scope, is the attitude which is seen in the following well-known passage by Wordsworth:

> There was a Boy: ye knew him well, ye cliffs
> And islands of Winander!—many a time
> At evening, when the earliest stars began
> To move along the edges of the hills,
> Rising or setting, would he stand alone
> Beneath the trees or by the glimmering lake,
> And there, with fingers interwoven, both hands
> Pressed closely palm to palm, and to his mouth
> Uplifted, he, as through an instrument,
> Blew mimic hootings to the silent owls,
> That they might answer him; and they would shout
> Across the watery vale, and shout again,

[1] It would be interesting, but perhaps not greatly profitable, to explore the connection between this attitude of poetry and the one described by Ruskin as the Pathetic Fallacy.

Responsive to his call, with quivering peals,
And long halloos and screams, and echoes loud,
Redoubled and redoubled, concourse wild
Of jocund din; and, when a lengthened pause
Of silence came and baffled his best skill,
Then sometimes, in that silence while he hung
Listening, a gentle shock of mild surprise
Has carried far into his heart the voice
Of mountain torrents; or the visible scene
Would enter unawares into his mind,
With all its solemn imagery, its rocks,
Its woods, and that uncertain heaven, received
Into the bosom of the steady lake.

At moments like these there enters into a mind the awareness of a deeper presence in nature, a something in which man himself participates. Wordsworth has defined this attitude more than once. I quote this time from the *Lines* written above Tintern Abbey:

For I have learned
To look on nature, not as in the hour
Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes
The still, sad music of humanity,
Nor harsh, nor grating, though of ample power
To chasten and subdue. And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.

The attitude again is one of peace. The mind of man is at home in a universe of which he is an intimate and cordial part. Again it is a release from or a denial of the small vexations, and the cruel disillusionments of life, and a refuge in the heart of

nature, until nature becomes a benevolent and beneficent divinity. The separate objects in nature are no longer a symbol of human joy or frailty, but now mingle and gradually fade in the vast panorama of a world order in which the sense even of personality, as a separate existence, is slowly lost. And attending the experience is the cosmic joy as "when the morning stars sang together and the sons of God shouted for joy." We may call the experience, if we please, mysticism, but there is nothing mystical in the manner in which it arrives. Though it may be a glimpse of the scope of the universe, it is far more a sign of the scope of the poet's mind. The poet again finds a compensation, but a compensation of a high order, perhaps of the highest order, for the practical riddle of life, for here all doubts at once come to rest in a cosmic peace.

Contrasted with this, because this is essentially the peace of the solitary souls and the bliss of anchorites, is the social compensation found in that generous outpouring of affection for all humanity and a willingness, nay, a gladness, to suffer for others. This attitude is the secret of the pleasure all must feel, at one time or another, in reading some of the stanzas in Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*. I quote a few lines that already are well known:

> To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite;
> To forgive wrongs darker than death or night;
> To defy Power, which seems omnipotent;
> To love, and bear; to hope till Hope creates
> From its own wreck the thing it contemplates.

Or this:

> Common as light is love,
> And its familiar voice wearies not ever.
> Like the wide heaven, the all-sustaining air,
> It makes the reptile equal to the God:
> They who inspire it most are fortunate,
> As I am now; but those who feel it most
> Are happier still, after long sufferings,
> As I shall soon become.

It is probably about this attitude of the mystery of those large spirits that seem to embrace all humanity that Walter Pater was speaking, when he replied to the suggestion of Mrs. Humphrey Ward that orthodox religion could not hold out against the assaults of science: "No, I don't think so: and we don't altogether agree. You think it's all plain. But I can't. There are such mysterious things. Take that saying: 'Come unto me, all ye that are weary and heavy-laden.' How can you explain that? There is a mystery in it—a something supernatural." But it is not supernatural. It is discoverable in all great poetry, from China to America—this theme of a universal brotherhood, and a spirit ready to find compensation, even a joy, in suffering for others. It is the only valid excuse that seems at hand for the use of that now much abused word, service. It is the poetry that gives a sufficient meaning to the mystery that lies at the heart of Christianity, and also of Buddhism. It is the attitude that prompted the martyrs and saints. For again it is the expansion of the scope of the individual experience to the point where even the significance of the individual seems to be lost in the larger world of all human beings.

Quite the opposite of this, yet I think still fundamentally religious, is that attitude of individual expansion, until the individual seems to assert with vehemence his supreme worth against a hostile or indifferent universe. I think one can catch it in the magnificent blaze of defiance of Satan in hell—a curious paradox.

> Farewell happy fields
> Where joy for ever dwells: hail horrors, hail
> Infernal world, and thou profoundest Hell
> Receive thy new possessor; one who brings
> A mind not to be chang'd by place or time.
> The mind is its own place, and in itself
> Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n.
> What matter where, if I be still the same,
> And what I should be, all but less than he
> Whom thunder hath made greater? Here at least

> We shall be free; th' Almighty hath not built
> Here for his envy, will not drive us hence:
> Here we may reign secure, and in my choice
> To reign is worth ambition though in Hell.

For in this attitude Satan finds compensation and becomes his own God. His personality fills the horizon. It is not the gradual loss of personality, as in the other, in the contemplation of a larger universe that is the sign of this state of mind, but the gradual loss of any universe save that of the immediate personality. The compensation here is one achieved by a denial almost of the significance of everything except the worth of the single human soul.

It is, on the other hand, at times only a magnificent gesture, a sheer outpouring of egotistical bombast, as in Henley's *Invictus*. As such, there may be in it all the elements of pure stage posing, of a petty soul posturing and gesticulating to the stars and reaching out "to grasp the iron hand of Fate." And though we may be hopelessly unable to find any leniency for such romantic aberrations, we must still recognise them at least as offerings of incense to strange gods.

At its best we see it in the restrained agony of Job, presenting his challenge to the Almighty, and summoning Him to trial. Far more emotional, and even hysterical, one sees it in the curse of Prometheus in the *Prometheus Unbound:* "Fiend I defy thee." Æschylus has managed this scene better in his tragedy:

> So then, let his blazing levin be hurled, and with the white wings of the snow and thunders of earthquake let him confound the reeling world. For naught of this shall bind my will.

In all poetry of this attitude man finds himself in a universe in which he is not at home, and he seeks compensation in himself; and his very agony becomes to him a source of joy, for it is a sign of his infinite worth.

Finally, easily recognizable is the attitude which is more obviously religious, that of the consciousness of a personal world spirit, a God who works for righteousness, and on whom man

may gladly cast his burden, and to whom he may look for comfort and peace. The idea of this Being varies indefinitely, and it is hardly possible that any two poets have of him the same experience. He may be infinitely above man, as to the poet of the Hebrew Psalm:

> What is man that thou art mindful of him,
> Or the son of man, that thou visitest him.

Or his austere power may strike the poet into submissive fear, as in Job:

> Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?
> —Declare, if thou hast understanding—
> Who determined the measures thereof, if thou knowest?
> Or who stretched the line upon it?
> Whereupon were the foundations thereof fastened?
> Or who laid the corner stone thereof;
> When the morning stars sang together,
> And all the sons of God shouted for joy?
> Or who shut up the sea with doors,
> When it brake forth, and issued out of the womb;
> When I made the cloud the garment thereof,
> And thick darkness a swaddling band for it,
> And prescribed for it my decree,
> And set bars and doors,
> And said, "Hitherto shalt thou come, but no farther."

Or it may take the form of sweet companionship and trust, as in the well-known verses of the Twenty-third Psalm—"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want"—or in the more intimate sentiment of Charles Wesley, "Jesus, Lover of my soul." Or it may envisage a God of wrath and a judgment of the wicked, as in the hymn of Thomas of Celano:

> Dies iræ, dies illa
> Solvet sæclum in favilla.

Quite different is one of the aspects of the Zeus of Homer, for Homer's chief deity is as variable as his heroes.

But of them [the other gods] took the father no heed, but aloof from the others he sat apart, glad in his glory, looking toward the city of the Trojans, and the ships of the Achaians, and the glitter of bronze, and the slayers and the slain.

The number of variations in this attitude may be illustrated indefinitely to show the larger, purely personal, and not theological character of the experience. A more complex and modern one, with a large ulterior significance, is seen in the closing lines of Browning's *Saul:*

'Tis the weakness in strength, that I cry for! my flesh, that I seek
In the Godhead! I seek and I find it. O Saul, it shall be
A Face like my face that receives thee; a Man like to me,
Thou shalt love and be loved by, for ever: a Hand like this hand
Shall throw open the gates of new life to thee! See the Christ stand!

Contrast with this the theme of Cardinal Newman's *Lead, Kindly Light,* and we return to something not unlike the attitude of the shepherd psalmist.

It is easy to discover here the motive for a search for compensation. It is again the riddle of an uncomfortable universe, which can be made bearable only, or joyous even, in the discovery of a person who shall right wrongs, and give meaning to life's inequalities, and make plain the meaning of suffering, or give a larger richness to joy.

For the secret of all religious poetry, or, better, all poetry that attains an attitude we may call religious, lies in the ultimate fact of compensation. The poet, whether he be a Dante or a Lucretius or a Browning, has discovered a meaning in a larger life, which compensates for the disorder the poet feels around him. He has literally discovered a heaven where he may find, if not peace, at least a compensation for living. For great poets do not sing of heaven, they find it in their own experience; and this it is that gives the poetry its large personal value. But it is not a theological heaven—though Dante tried hard to convince himself of the universality of his vision; it is an experience of accomplishment and of a vision that has wider and truer scope than

the eye of man, in his practical life, has the power to see. Nor in its higher forms is it an experience of passive resignation or of easy acceptance; rather it is the reward of a conflict and through effort a subduing of many paradoxes into a coherent whole. This it is, as we have seen, that gives such experiences their power and value. This heaven is not reached at a bound or without effort; it is the result of the most strenuous anxiety and strife, and pain even and despair. And the search for it involves the whole universe:

> From heaven claimeth he the fairest star,
> And from the earth craves every highest good
> And all that's near and all that's far,
> Fails to allay the tumult in his blood.[1]

The poetic heaven is not a place or a transcendental reward, it is a state of mind; after a conflict the poet has achieved peace.

It is the transcendental scope of these experiences that leads an easy criticism to exploit the Truth, Goodness, and Beauty theories of poetry, and to set up an ideal world where these abstractions become real and a motive in human life. It is easy then to associate them with religion, and thus by a perfect syllogism find an æsthetic basis for religion as well as poetry, or, what is even easier, to identify poetry and religion. The very easiness of the trick invites one to take it and close the argument. But the reality of the poet's state of mind, and the intensity of his experience, should put us on our guard. Even Plato, that prince of idealists, when he sketches for us the world of Ideas, makes it none too easy to enter. And his idea of Truth or Goodness or Beauty, which are all one, is not easy for even an æsthetic mind to grasp. Poetry at its highest is not an easy experience; its range is too wide. "Its rudimentary essays," I quote again from Professor Santayana, "in the region of fancy and pleasant sounds, as well as its idealization of episodes in human existence, are only partial exercises in an art that has all time and all experience for its natural subject matter, and all possibilities of being for its ultimate theme."

[1] Goethe, *Faust*, Swanwick tr.

What I am trying to say is this, that what the poet in these experiences is dealing with is not a set of abstractions but the most vivid of concrete reality; and the beauty or truth he attains to is not an abstraction but such an ordering of concrete reality as his imagination has the scope for. He is not rising out of the world, though he rises above its paradoxes; what he experiences are not unrealities or things of another species of existence, but the motives and conflicts and pains and joys of this life. His is no æsthetic world to which ideally he can retire and shut the door against the war of circumstance; but he opens wide the door to the most blatant of incidents and subdues them to pattern and rule. And the higher order or the God he discovers is a God of this world and an order that is here and now. This is the fact, patent to all poets of the higher order, that makes one so impatient of the easy approach of the so-called æsthetic argument and its world of pure abstraction. It is magnificent but it is not the world of great poetry; rather, it is the denial of great poetry.

Furthermore, it is precisely because the modern æsthetic theory lays so little store by the objective value of its world or, as the expressionists call it, of its "Beauty," that such a theory has so little relevancy to life. Poetry, if it lacks an objective significance, though it may be a beautiful pastime, loses dignity and caste, and especially if it be poetry that calls itself religious. What avails the price of all this storm and stress, why this voyage from hell to heaven and the pain and joy of the arduous journey, if it all be a thing of no more abiding value than the colors of last night's sunset? Faust's journey to the "Mothers" for the secret of Beauty was a real quest and not a voyage into pure fancy; and the journey led through the terrors of unknown, because unachieved, experience. It was not a state of mind he was searching for alone, but objective reality that would later give the state of mind moral significance.

The same objection should hold against the type of critical theory that contents itself with a value for these states of mind in the states themselves, not inquiring further if there be any objective

basis for the "poetic belief." To be sure, no one can quarrel with the value to the mind of an experience which calls its whole powers into play. The greater the mind, the richer its powers. But man's mind is not a machine that works curiously with practical things of living for a while, but then to display its highest powers indulges in meaningless pyrotechnics.

If these attitudes have an internal value, they have also an external, which can be checked by experience. That they are unverifiable by scientific methods we have abundantly discovered, and why; but that they may be verified by the larger life is also within the scope of the argument, for they can be lived. For with all such poets, Sophocles, Shelley, Wordsworth, and even Plato, the resolute demand is made that these experiences can be translated into action, and that in action they can be lived even more richly.

At the cost perhaps of being tedious, it is appropriate to carry the discussion one step farther. These experiences represent rapid generalizations the poets have made as they stand dismayed, or affrighted, or calm in the presence of the complexity and inescapable heterogeneousness of life itself. Into this mass of irrelevancies the poet suddenly, like a landscape painter, reads a pattern, which suddenly makes all orderly and manageable. The pattern he discovers, or creates, may be faulty—we know only too well it will be incomplete,—it may be hopelessly misleading, and of this we must ever be on our guard; but it is a pattern, and, as such, an explanation without which life would remain to us, who have lesser powers, a brute assemblage of meaningless detail. To assert that a poetic creed lacks objective value is to register the same objection, in a far more emphatic manner, against every metaphysical system. For out of the insight of the poet have come those edifices of philosophy as well as of religion.

In this last fact we have already caught a hint that may explain what Shelley means when he calls the poets "philosophers"; or Coleridge when he writes: "No man was ever a great poet, without being at the same time a profound philosopher. For

poetry is the blossom and the fragrancy of all human knowledge, human thought, human passions, emotions, languages." What this certainly does not mean is that these poetic attitudes are the result of what we call reflection or abstract thinking, like the systems of the metaphysical philosophers. For of these the philosopher Coleridge also has something to say: "They [the writings of the mystics] gave me an indistinct yet stirring and working presentiment that all the products of the mere reflective faculty partook of death, and were as the rattling twigs and sprays in winter." Indeed, of one thing we may be sure, the intellect alone has little to do with the formulation of these poetic beliefs or experiences.

But they have been influential in philosophy, and indeed are the source of what we call our metaphysical and religious dogmas and creeds. "Every philosophy," writes Professor Whitehead, "is tinged with the coloring of some secret imaginative background." I would say that it was suggested to the philosopher by some poet, or the philosopher himself, like Plato, was a poet. For it is a common enough observation, as Remy de Gourmont writes, that "the whole effort of a sincere man is to erect his personal impressions into universal laws." A very excellent illustration of this is the well-known poetic experience of Rousseau before he wrote his first pamphlet on the effect of civilization on the happiness of mankind. His attitude that civilization is a curse came to him purely as a poetic insight; he attempted in the treatise to translate it into universal terms and make it into a dogma or creed. Perhaps better known is his effort to erect a social creed on the "rights of man" out of his poetic experience of universal brotherhood, an experience not unlike that of Shelley's *Prometheus*. But when this is done, the intellect takes over the unique experience, translates it into definable terms and exploits it as a thing of universal applicability, that is, draws off its concrete character and makes of it a pure abstraction.

Exactly so is it with systems of metaphysics and the dogmas of religion. Spinoza, the God-intoxicated, begins with an experience not unlike Wordsworth's vision of a world spirit in whose

life both man and nature participate; and from it he extracts a logical system of dogmatic pantheism. It is saved from the death and aridity that Coleridge deplores, because Spinoza remains to the end poet as well as philosopher.[1] Only a little different is the habit of translating religious experience into dogma with its varied ramifications. Heaven, hell, the divine attributes, the classification of sins and virtues, the paraphernalia of repentance and salvation: all these have a poetic experience of one kind or another as their germ, which, elaborated, refined, systematized, and coordinated gives us the vast structure we call a church and liturgy. Behind it all, and giving it its life and motive, is the original experience, the intuition, if you will so call it, or the revelation, if you prefer, of the poet. One may warm his hands at a religious creed, or be willing to go to the stake for a dogma, but behind is the vitality of the attitude, and this is life itself.

Different in kind, but not in effect, are the poetic myths, which lend the value of poetic experience, that the poet has concretized, to the story of the myth. In an early poetry they are attitudes crystallized, as it were, about appropriate persons or stories, and thus valuable through association. Later history and tradition have furnished the evidence that myth-making as an art did not die with primitive people. If I might use the expression, it is a poetic belief, not universalized into a dogma, but personified and thus made directly available in a legend.

Finally, it is pertinent to ask if these varied religious attitudes do not by their very multiplicity tend to choke each other like weeds in a garden. And further, if they translate themselves into dogmas which differ completely from one another, where shall we look for guidance or truth? For the second question, I am afraid I have neither the learning nor the interest to attempt an answer. It might be better, and safer, to refer to the analogy of philosophy, where we have side by side systems of philosophy that seem mutually contradictory—Hume and Hegel, Kant and Descartes, Plato and Herbert Spencer—and yet all valuable, not

[1] This fact is evidenced even more clearly in the thinking of the philosopher Schelling and the others of the Romantic School.

alone as interesting landmarks in the history of thought, but as significant *aperçus* to the original question of man and his universe. None is fundamentally false, yet none is triumphantly true. Yet each philosopher felt personally convinced of the utter sincerity and validity of his system. In a similar way we may not condemn nor escape dogma and creed. The old paganism had it; so does each ethnic religion as well as village cult.

Like philosophic systems, dogmas change from age to age and from people to people, and acquire new meanings. Superficially though they may not seem to change, few human institutions are more unstable; and yet they are necessary. For the human mind will not rest until it has translated the significance of a significant experience into something universal that the intellect can grasp and hold. Hence we should, if we would be honest with ourselves, give up the hope of ever arriving at the supreme dogma, like the supreme philosophy, for its discovery would mean that we had arrived at the supreme experience, and when we do, it will be a sign that humanity has finally crystallized, and richer experience and finer thought have become impossible.

It is a much more profitable question to ask how one can at the same time endure the calm pessimism that is at the heart of Lucretius, and the glorious vision of perfectibility in Dante, the utterly personal trust of the psalmist, and the magnificent renunciation or transcendence of personality in Wordsworth's *Lines*. To answer this, one must remember not to confuse them with their translated dogmas. As a complete philosophy of life, and a system of thought, the thing with which Lucretius can be identified is different *toto cælo* from the mediæval philosophy of Saint Thomas whose fossils can be discovered in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. So also the Hebrew theological conception of Yahweh, which can be seen as a sketch in the psalmist, is different from a system of pantheism which may be abstracted, if we desire, from Wordsworth. One cannot be at the same time, it is true, an Epicurean materialist, a mediæval Thomist, a Hebrew Yahwist, and a pantheist. But now we are talking purely of

intellectual creeds, and creeds have their own peculiar value and validity.

But when one reads the four poems, for the moment, if one reads rightly, one forgets creeds and intellectual abstractions, and all such irrelevancies, and lives the particular experience. And as experience each is a way, and a valuable way, of living. One does not become a pessimist by reading Lucretius, as Lucretius did not when writing the *de Rerum Natura*. One does not renounce modern science and geology in traveling the *via dolorosa* with Dante; one can laugh, if one will, at the puerility of Wordsworth's nature philosophy and yet enjoy utterly the *Prelude*. And one may detest the Hebrew theological Yahweh and yet love the psalmist. For theories of philosophy do not exhaust the art of living, and no living experience, be it even a slight one, was ever fully translated into a creed.

Chapter X

SCIENCE[1] AND POETRY

A PAINFUL PARADOX—THE VICTORIAN COMPROMISE—THE QUARREL NOT OLD—THE NEW SUBJECTIVE POETRY—THE OBJECTIVE ATTITUDE OF SCIENCE—THE ABSTRACTIONS OF SCIENCE—THE "REIGN OF LAW"—THE PROTEST OF POETRY—THE QUESTION OF HUMAN VALUES—A POSSIBLE RECONCILIATION—THE GIFT OF POETRY TO SCIENCE—THE PRAGMATIC TEST—A COMMON FACTOR IN POETRY AND SCIENCE—LITERATURE AND POETRY AS SCIENCE.

EVERY reader, at some time or other, has felt the immense discrepancy between the world of physical science and biology—heartless, orderly, and inevitable—and the world of poetry—warm, personal, spontaneous, and of infinite value. The vision, when it comes, of this paradox of life—claims of personality in a world that knows no claims save those of unyielding obedience—portrays the most crushing burden humanity has to bear—and the most eloquent of poetry.

> If all be governed by the moving stars,
> If passing planets bring events to be,
> Searing the face of Time with bloody scars,
> Drawing men's souls even as the moon the sea;
> If as they pass they make a current pass
> Across man's life and heap it to a tide,
> We are but pawns, ignobler than the grass
> Cropped by the beast and crunched and tossed aside.
> Is all this beauty that does inhabit heaven

[1] It will be obvious, I hope, as I use this word, that I am referring to the physical and biological sciences and to certain tendencies in psychology and sociology. Perhaps a better term to have used would have been the scientific theory of mechanical determinism. Since the time of Zola and Brunetière the word has in this connection had this implication.

Trail of a planet's fire? Is all this lust
A chymic means by warring stars contriven
To bring the violets out of Cæsar's dust?
Better be grass, or in some hedge unknown
The spilling rose whose beauty is its own.[1]

But as a protest against this *Weltschmerz,* the cry of poetry against the attitude of determinism from the days of Lucretius and Omar to our own, varied only as science has tightened or relaxed its grip, are raised the exultant proclamation of poetic faith that the truths of physical science are not ultimate truths, that behind both is a higher and richer reality that the intuition of the poet and the worth of his world must verify. And this exultant defiance has also taken many forms.

Like one who solves some curious alphabet
On desert stele . . . and then solves a word . . .
Though the God's whispering I never heard,
And though my eyes were cruelly unwet
(Harshly encountering so much to do),
I know how ineradicably absurd
That Man is but a function of the Two,
Physics and Chemistry—that we can spell
By atom and motion (or by twitch and cell)
The ineffable Adventure I've been through. . . .
I know Love, Pain, and Power are spirit-things,
My Act a more than Mine or Now or Near:
One with the Will that suffers, conquers, sings,
I was the mystic Voice I could not hear.[2]

Whether this resolute trust in a world that is not all governed by "twitch" of nerve and by laws of physics and chemistry is widely shared or is a meaningless gesture of a few, is now beside the mark; but of one fact we may never have a doubt: for the past century and more, poetry has felt itself insecure, felt that the burden of proof lay on its shoulders, for where could it point,

[1] "Sonnet," from *Poems,* vol. i, by John Masefield; copyright 1925, reprinted by permission of The Macmillan Company.
[2] William Ellery Leonard, *Two Lives;* copyright 1925, B. W. Huebsch, Inc., New York, The Viking Press.

like physics, to so complete a triumph? On the other hand, natural science has gone ahead uninterruptedly for these past three hundred years subduing to its inevitable laws the cosmic universe, until there appears to be no domain, save that of the poet, that remains unconquered; and even this the modern biology and psychology seem to have successfully invaded. Against this encroachment the poet raises his passionate "I know," and brings as evidence only his emotional conviction that somewhere in the armor of science there must be a loose joint, a gap in its defense, that time and man's power will reveal. The triumphant progress of the logic of science is a spectacle anyone may verify; the strength of the poet's conviction only the poet can be assured of. Is there any wonder that the paradox of our time should be the quarrel, inveterate it seems, between the attitudes of natural science and of poetry?

One sees it at the beginning of the last century in the poetry of Wordsworth:

> One impulse from a vernal wood
> May teach you more of man,
> Of moral evil and of good,
> Than all the sages can.

Or again:

> Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;
> Our meddling intellect
> Misshapes the beauteous forms of things;
> We murder to dissect.
>
> Enough of Science and of Art;
> Close up those barren leaves;
> Come forth, and bring with you a heart
> That watches and receives.

Tennyson watched the progress of science with enthusiasm and apprehension. But his faith required no small effort to keep itself from giving up the contest.

Strong son of God, immortal Love,
Whom we, that have not seen thy face,
By Faith, and Faith alone, embrace,
Believing where we cannot prove.

And here is the heart of the conflict—poetry is unable to bring to its aid the fact of demonstration, for logical demonstration is the method only of science. Is it to be wondered at that the orthodox scientist, like Herbert Spencer, to whom the whole universe was the field for science, could find no room in his armory for the unique methods of poetry, a manner of looking at things that apparently has no laws and no intellectually formulated creed? How can a thing like this be taken seriously by men who with science were on the point—so it seemed then—of unlocking the last secret of nature and life? [1]

It was this double attitude, involving an apparently insoluble paradox, that gave its meaning to the thing that is usually called the Victorian Compromise. In consequence we have what in reality is a pathetic spectacle, men like Arnold and Tennyson and Browning trying to reconcile a life which was divided by the two attitudes of faith and science, mutually exclusive and contradictory. Matthew Arnold's poetry is full of this particular sadness:

We
Vague half-believers of our casual creeds,
Who never deeply felt, nor clearly will'd,
Whose insight never has borne fruit in deeds,
Whose weak resolves never have been fulfill'd;
For whom each year we see
Breeds new beginnings, disappointments new;
Who hesitate and falter life away,
And lose tomorrow the ground won today.

The bitterness of these "disappointments" we are not delivered from even today, for the very intimacy of poetry is its richest

[1] It might be appropriate here to discuss Spencer's theory of poetry more in detail and in connection with his philosophy. Professor Scott's edition of his *Theory of style* has already done this. In brief to Spencer, poetry is only valuable because as a method it permits economy and effectiveness in expression of ideas.

value; and yet, how discover a reconciliation with natural science, whose value also none can dispute, and whose verifications seem to have a clear objective quality poetry may never hope to attain?

Before Tennyson and Matthew Arnold, other poets and thinkers had searched for the relations between poetry and science. Coleridge is explicit. There is between them a difference of object and contents. For science the "immediate purpose may be the communication of truths,—truth absolute and demonstrable." Poetry has none of this purely pedestrian or utilitarian purpose. Shelley perhaps is more satisfying, as he sees also that the conflict is not necessarily a perpetual one. Reason, or science, is "mind contemplating the relations of one thought to another, however produced." The poetic power is, on the other hand, "mind coloring those thoughts with its own light, ultimately making other thoughts." "Reason is to the imagination as the instrument to the agent, as the body to the spirit, as the shadow to the substance." Or again, as he differentiates logic, that is, the method of science, from poetry: "Poetry differs in this respect from logic, that it is not subject to the control of the active powers of the mind, and that its birth and recurrence have no necessary connection with the consciousness or will." All this may most emphatically be true; yet if these two separate faculties, even if they are complementary, flatly contradict each other, what then? Does human nature rest upon an essential paradox?

It is true that before the advent of natural science as a world conqueror, poetry got along very well with the other varieties of human activity. To Dante, science and poetry should have an identical aim. To be sure, Aristotle in the *Poetics* makes a statement that may seem to sound an alarm: "The standards of correctness are not the same in poetry and politics"; and he suggests in another place that, "hence poetry implies either a happy gift of nature or a strain of madness." But neither of these sentences seems to refer to anything more than the difference already explored between the poetic experience and the ordinary routine of

life with its necessary codes and conventions. There is no suggestion that science and poetry are engaged in a civil war.

But after natural science began perfecting its technique and organizing its attitude toward life, there took place a very noticeable change in the subject matter of poetry. In effect it was little less than a revolution. The old poetry was primarily objective in its outlook, and less concerned directly in exploiting the personal reactions of the poet's own mind. The moving spectacle of life, whether real or imaginary, attracted it, and there were numerous signs along the way, in the words of the critics, to warn against individual eccentricity and romantic exaggeration, and even against the exploitation of one's own inner life. Horace's *Arts Poetica,* and its later disciple, Boileau's *L'Art Poétique,* pointed out clearly that the path to success consisted in a careful study of man and nature. For only "good sense" and knowledge are matters that count in the long run.[1] There were protests, of course, from the very beginning; but nowhere in the work of the Elizabethans, for example, was there anything that had quite the large subjective mood of Wordsworth or Alfred de Musset, much less the entire personal self-absorption of a Paul Verlaine or Shelley or Leopardi.

Whether this gradually growing subjective attitude of poetry is an indirect result of the growing influence of science, and a protest against its cold objectivity, or not, is now perhaps beside the matter. But it is true that during the past hundred and fifty years poetry has tended more and more to restrict itself to the lyric, abandoning the objective study of life to the late newcomer in literature, the prose novel, and has even shown reluctance to undertake poetic tragedy, its once greatest triumph. The result has been bad, both for poetry and for science. It looks as though poetry on the defensive has abandoned the open field, and has retired to the trenches of its own soul, for whose

[1] For example, here is Pascal's outcry against the imagination: "Imagination—This is the most untrustworthy faculty in man, the mistress of error and deceit, and all the more perfidious because it is not always such; for it would be an infallible guide to truth, if it were incapable of a lie. But, being more frequently false, it gives no hint of its character, marking with the same sign truth and falsehood."

freedom it is now battling against the determinism and materialism of a universal science.

At the same time, to the scientist the spectacle is equally unedifying. Convinced of its creed by the retreat of poetry which it had never regarded as an enemy, for even Bacon and Hobbes were respectful in its presence, science came to feel no small contempt for its often willful and romantic outcries, and ended by ignoring its existence. Not only this, but it has been pursuing a course exactly opposite to that of poetry. For while poetry has been becoming increasingly subjective, science has taken its way into larger and larger worlds of abstractions, ideally objective, but none the less abstractions, and has built up the idea of an abstract objective world, the world of scientific law, which will explain adequately all cosmic phenomena, even human life and destiny.[1]

Hence there came the apparently fatal dichotomy between the two faculties of "reason" and "imagination," as some thinkers have described them: science, concerned with pure thought, that is, the abstract concepts of the objective world, whose processes are of reason and logic; poetry, concerned with the imagination, an inner world of personal experience, and whose value can have no measure in terms of the scientific reason. At least in this manner the case is more than once presented for both.[2]

For the value of natural science is in terms of mechanics. Its tendency has always been to look upon the universe in its entirety as a result of formal and immutable law. In this each individual finds his place, and each incident its value in the chain of incident. The mathematically recoverable formulas are able to state precisely the significance of each incident and each individual. It is a structure logically impeccable, and apparently capable of perfect verification.[3] In this sense science is also a tool, for its ab-

[1] See Herbert Spencer's *Principles of Psychology,* the chapter on the Will.

[2] See, for example, Professor Santayana, *An Interpretation of Religion and Poetry.*

[3] See Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World,* a very suggestive and valuable synopsis of the development of the theory of science, and its relations to some of man's other activities. The book contains a sketch of Professor Whitehead's theory on organisms—a valuable hint.

stractions are a means for the discovery of further abstractions. For, as Professor Whitehead observes, "the paradox is now fully established that the utmost abstractions (*i.e.,* mathematics) are the true weapons with which to control our thoughts of concrete fact." But this concrete fact, as Bergson would point out, is of no value to science until its concreteness, that is, its immediate significance to the incident in which it appears, has been abstracted from it, and it is made to classify itself with other facts of a similar nature.

So there is something ulterior in the interest of science in fact. If the old story be true, Newton was not interested in the fall of the apple because it was an apple or because he was under the tree at the time, but because he saw in the movement of the apple the same fact that he could also observe in the movement of a planet. A poet, writing an epic of the history of science, might find in this one incident as much dramatic worth as in another where the same fruit was concerned; but he would be a poet, and "that forbidden fruit" on this occasion would have for him a personal value quite remote from the scientific abstraction of the law of moving bodies. But not so to the scientist—there is no such personal screen in his imagination, or at least it has a different mesh, through which fact must pass before it can have value to his conscience. The very necessity of verification compels the ideal scientist to be almost an abstraction himself.

But in this last we have gone too far. For in the relation of the scientist to his world of law, and until of late often overlooked by the scientist, there lurks an essential paradox. There is, on the one hand, the orderly universe of law and abstraction; but there is also the human observer, the scientist himself, who is a part of this universe, but at the same time in his own mind coolly observing and freely recording and abstracting his laws. Though the value of science is not personal, yet we have always the free personal observer, and, because of the possibility of communication, a multitude of other similarly free personal observers. This curious and yet very real situation science until recently has not

found accommodation for, in its theory of a determined, material universe.[1]

The world of science, as its orthodox defenders had defined it, is the world of law and purely materialistic determinism, which has no place for human personality, as poetry values personality, or for human values. For to it man is but one more of the numerous phases of the processes of nature, and as amenable to the laws of physics and biology as any other of the congeries of physical atoms or protoplasmic cells. There is no room in these sciences for those human motives that give value to comedy or tragedy. Nature is orderly, and what looks like grotesqueness or pain is only a peculiar but still perfectly calculable physical phenomenon. And the harmony of the inner life, and the feeling of responsibility, and the dignity of the attitude of freedom—these are, like the scent of the flower or the breath of spring, only the necessary and irrelevant way in which nature proceeds.

This attitude, which the scientist accepted complacently enough for stars and crystals, the poet Keats protests against:

> Poetry alone can tell her dreams,
> With the fine spell of words alone can save
> Imagination from the sable chain
> And dumb enchantment.

For it is the imagination alone that can free experience from the routine and law of the rest of nature; it is the faculty divine that reveals to man his larger heritage and his larger freedom. It alone can reveal Beauty, something higher and truer than the world of law. It is in this spirit that Keats proclaimed,

> Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty.

To the poet alone is it permitted to keep alive and creative this richer world of experience, and thus to free the imagination from the trammels of law, and language from the grave of abstractions. I think it must have been with some such intimation that Hebbel wrote that "Art is the conscience of mankind."

[1] But it was this very fact that Lucretius saw a century before the Christian Era, and twenty centuries before Comte and Herbert Spencer!

And he added in another place: "One does not sit down to play the piano in order to demonstrate a mathematical truth. Nor does one write poetry to prove anything. It is the peculiar beauty of all of the higher activities of man that they serve purposes that were not in the mind of the acting individual." This is no more than the triumphant assertion that there is no intercourse between the world of art and poetry and the world of reason and demonstration: an armed truce that more than once gives place to active hostilities. The scientist charging that poetry and art are essentially unreal, and the pastime of utterly irresponsible persons with no conscience for fact and law; the poets responding, many of them, by going over in panic into the camp of art for art's sake and subjectivity, and proclaiming the utter independence of art of any practical considerations. It is not quite an edifying spectacle.[1]

This conflict has brought discredit to both science and poetry, and a feeling of insecurity; but also a very real distress to all humanity. There cannot be two standards of truth—at least so it would seem—in a matter that concerns human life and human conduct so intimately. To the thoughtful person, the spectacle of a tendency in poetry to exploit the theory of art for art's sake, and to plead in its justification a higher law than the verifiable code of science, seems not unlike turning one's back on the problem and burying oneself in an intoxication of a willful epicureanism, though of art.

Nor can a science ever be quite convincing, no matter what objective verification it may bring forward, which leaves no room for the admittance of the question of human fate. We may even go farther. The apparent discrepancy between the world of science and that of poetry has enfeebled science, or at least has always left it with a haunting sense of something to be desired. A philosophy of pure deterministic materialism involves a loss of human values that even the triumph of science cannot dis-

[1] Croce in his *Æsthetics* tries to hold out a ray of hope, but it is in a direction that seems to concern the chief value of science. "The distinction between poetry and prose can only be resolved in that between art and science. . . . Poetry is the language of the sentiment, prose that of the intellect; but because the intellect in its concreteness touches reality and also sentiment, all prose has an aspect of poetry."

guise. For it is always pertinent to exclaim with Omar, when listening to all this closely articulated system that leaves out all that makes life an adventure:

> Myself when young did eagerly frequent
> Doctor and Saint, and heard great argument
> About it and about: but evermore
> Came out by the same door where in I went.
>
> With them the seed of Wisdom did I sow,
> And with mine own hand wrought to make it grow;
> And this was all the Harvest that I reaped—
> "I came like Water, and like Wind I go."
>
> Into this Universe, and *Why* not knowing
> Nor *Whence,* like Water willy-nilly flowing;
> And out of it, as Wind along the Waste,
> I know not *Whither,* willy-nilly blowing.
>
> What, without asking, hither hurried *Whence?*
> And, without asking, *Whither* hurried hence!
> Oh, many a Cup of this forbidden Wine
> Must crown the memory of that insolence.

And to this plea there can be no answer—if science and poetry are to remain inveterate enemies.

But to acquiesce in a discrepancy like this is destructive of "candor and moral cleanliness." Human nature, as has always been maintained, and it can be verified by one's own experience, is not a thing of compartments and separable values. Any acceptance, in consequence, of a paradox at the heart of life is always painful and ruinous to the motives for living. Or, as Professor Whitehead has put it, "a clash of opinion" is not a motive for necessary distress, but an "opportunity." A fuller and richer understanding of the value of each may discover to us, and doubtless will, that after all the quarrel is not between an impersonal universality and determinism, and a poetry that seems to be fleeing to a personal expressionism and subjective caprice. A recon-

ciliation, if it can be achieved, surely will be heartening to both combatants. A full philosophy of life and of nature ought to be able to discover that there is room for both the motives of science and those of poetry, and to discover a hope of a reconciliation between the values of both.

Many things today would seem to be pointing to the fact that poetry and science are not inveterate enemies. As we saw, ancient poetry had not discovered it, though there was a very real spirit of scientific inquiry among the Greeks. Lucretius even went so far as to find in the theme of scientific determinism a motive for the highest poetry, *"Musæo contingens cuncta lepore."*

> Why is it, O man, that thou indulgest in excessive grief? Why shed tears that thou must die? For if thy past life has been one of enjoyment, and if all thy pleasures have not passed through thy mind, as through a sieve, and vanished, leaving not a rack behind, why then dost thou not, like a thankful guest, rise cheerfully from life's feast, and with a quiet mind go take thy rest?

To Lucretius, man's place in nature brought a sense of dignified peace, not a panic of self-assertion. To Shelley, interested in the new knowledge and fascinated by its possibilities, there was a clear coöperation between the world of science and that of poetry; only poetry had of late lagged in its utilization of the accumulation of knowledge supplied by the newly awakened science. "Reason is to the imagination as the instrument to the agent, as the body to the spirit, as the shadow to the substance." "Reason is the enumeration of qualities already known; imagination is the perception of the value of those qualities." But poetry was failing science by an inability to perceive the value of the scientific victories. "We want the creative faculty to imagine what we know; we want the generous impulse to act that which we imagine; we want the poetry of life: our calculations have outrun conception; we have eaten more than we can digest." The reason, then, to Shelley, for our present conflict lies with poetry; it has slackened, dismayed in the only effort that is worth while to poetry.

Something of the same thought is found even in Tolstoy, whom most regard, in theory at least, as opposed to the triumphs of modern science, and longing for the primitive world of peasants and handicraftsmen.

> Science and art are as closely bound together as the lungs and the heart, so that if one organ is vitiated the other cannot act rightly.
>
> True science investigates and brings to human perception such truths and such knowledge as the people of a given time and society consider most important. Art transmits these truths from the region of perception to the region of emotion. Therefore, if the path chosen by science be false, so also will be the path taken by art. Science and art are like a certain kind of barge with kedge-anchors which used to ply on our rivers. Science, like the boats which took the anchors upstream and made them secure, gives direction to the forward movement; while art, like the windlass worked on the barge to draw it toward the anchor, causes the actual progression. And thus a false activity of science inevitably causes a correspondingly false activity of art.

More than this, it was poetry that gave to science its first great postulate, without which there could be no science. It was a poet, and none other than the world's first great master, who arrived by the scope of his imaginative experience at the idea of an orderly world in which the processes of nature are regular and calculable, and asserted that the reason of man is a fit weapon to attack the secrets of nature. This formidable and truly amazing idea is first discoverable in the poems of Homer—a motive that looks for intelligibility both in the life of man and in the way things happen in nature. The hint thus given, Pindar built into his lyrics and the Greek tragedians into their great dramas, and passed on to the daily life of the Greek cities. And from Greece through Christianity it came to modern Europe.

But of recent years there have begun some notable readjustments in the philosophy of science—readjustments that are full of promise for the future. The orthodox dogmatism of the rigid scientific method, and the purely mechanistic theory of life, both seem on the point of being abandoned. As Bergson pointed out

not many years ago, the way to combat or mitigate pure mechanism is by showing that it applies merely to abstractions, and that life itself is a very different thing. And as for the term "materialism," the best scientific thought has long since ceased to use the word as though it implied that "matter" has an essential difference in substance from "spirit." The old theory has for some time now been jettisoned, that spirit is the realm of æsthetics and ethics, and matter the undisputed domain of natural science. This easy dichotomy has proved itself as false as it was easy. Again in the words of Professor Whitehead, we shall "mitigate materialism when we find it not mechanism."

And this is precisely what seems to have come about. As was said earlier in the chapter, the old science felt that its generalizations and laws were true under all possible conditions and for every possible observer. For a time the rapid extension of its conquest was a tribute to the excellence of its method—up to a point. And that point seems now to have been reached with some of the latest revolutionary discoveries in physics.[1] This is not the place to undertake an explanation of all that is involved in this new attitude of the philosophy of science. But so much may be made reasonably clear. Now we are beginning to recognize the fact that there is an observer observing the world under a very definite and conventionally fixed set of conditions. Under these conditions, let us say three-dimensional space, he sees it to be determined according to such and such so-called laws of nature. But the whole set of observations are determined by the position and the immediate problem of the observer; if the conditions change, and let us say the three-dimensional world gives way to a four-dimensional, the results are found to have altered, and the observer has a different set of formulas. More than this, the new philosophy of science has gone on record as abandoning the theory of perfect determinism. This does not mean that modern physics

[1] I am referring to the recent overhauling of the concepts of science due to the relativity theory of Einstein and the more recent quantum theory. See Eddington's *Nature of the Physical World,* Smutz' *Holism and Heredity,* Birkhoffs' *The Origin, Nature and Influence of Relativity,* etc.

has abandoned the world to chance; but it has allowed the nose of the camel into its hitherto jealously guarded tent.

The findings of the scientist are valuable for the practical life and for the intellectual life because they work; but they are no longer felt to be final transcripts of reality. They are real only as records taken under certain fixed conditions; and "the external world of physics has been formulated as an answer to a particular problem encountered in human experience." It is by such hints as these that science is beginning to look with some mistrust upon its own handiwork, and talks no more about ever being able to arrive at ultimate truths. It is thus also that science itself, which once boasted its objectivity, seems driven more and more to the attitude that its methods likewise have a measure of the subjective. I have just quoted from Professor Eddington: to the quotation I add this sentence: "All through the physical world runs that unknown content, which must be the stuff of our consciousness . . . yet unattainable by the method of physics." And this: "the mind has regained from nature that which the mind has put into nature." It begins to look as if at least one highly respectable wing of science were turning toward a well-known philosophical idealism.

What we seem to be coming to is certainly not a reconciliation of the method of science with that of poetry, but a clearer understanding of the province of each. Both are ways of looking at the world and at life. Each has its own series of conditions under which it may best observe and record. The fact that those selected by science lead to a series of mathematical formulas and within limits to a series of determinisms, by no means should confirm us in a belief that they are true outside of their realm, nor in a further belief that poetry, which finds a quite different set of values, because it may not use the weapon of science to prove their validity, must of necessity have an inferior worth.

Perhaps an illustration will serve. Let us take what Professor Whitehead calls a particular "occasion of experience," for example, Keats' last sonnet (see page 70). The mathematical physicist could possibly reduce the whole play of imagery to

shadow pictures of swarms of electrons whose velocity could be calculated and set forth neatly in mathematical formulas. For the whole experience he would give us Roman and Greek letters, indices and radicals enough to fill pages, and all to him doubtless full of meaning, but not exactly the kind of meaning that was in the poet's mind when he composed the poem. Similarly, a physiologist and psychologist would talk in terms of certain other natural laws, doubtless also illuminating, on the subject of the biological and behavioristic implications of being ill, in love, and away from the beloved object. But these also the poet would doubtless reject as not at all in his mind when he wrote this cry for peace. In other words, an "occasion of experience" has other aspects than the scientific and other values; and a complete philosophy must take this fact into consideration before it can be true to all the essential problems that human nature raises. There was a time when it looked as though the whole combination of man and the world in which he found himself was likely to pass into the domain of a triumphant physics. But now the physicist is less secure in his dogmatism. "Starting from æther, electrons, and other physical machinery," writes Professor Eddington, "we cannot reach conscious man and render count of what is apprehended in his consciousness." Is it not possible also that the newer sciences of biology and psychology will sometime with similar humility confess that their formulas likewise have no hint which can reveal the secret of the value of an experience to the human soul?

I think we can go farther. The data for science come through the senses, and are to begin with one remove from reality. When they have been reduced to formulas they have lost seemingly all connection with the sense image, and the world we contemplate has become a shadow world quite unreal to our daily lives. The inner consciousness of value, on the other hand, is an insight rather than a piece of image building; it is immediate and conclusive. Though by its very nature it lies without the world of metrical measurements, or even of experiment, its value for the problem of living is not lessened in the slightest.

It seems now that even scientists are willing to maintain that science and poetry, instead of being mutually exclusive activities of the human mind, have at least one very essential thing in common. Both have the observer and the experience observed. Both the scientific observer and the poet creator stand, as it were, in the center each of his particular experience. To both its value rests in the record of their observations. That science strips the incident of its concreteness and wishes to see it in its aspect of universality, and that poetry finds its value in its personal concreteness—all this is only a difference of method, and a study of the experience under different aspects. It is only to the superficial mind that they may appear to be looking at two essentially different objects. In consequence it ought not to be impossible to assume that they are not working at cross purposes, if both are sincere.

For this reason also we are able to pronounce judgment on literature and poetry that attempt to ape the method of science. I am thinking of Emile Zola and his numerous followers who try to put human nature into a test tube, as it were, in their novels, and watch the result as a scientist watches the outcome of an experiment. Zola wrote an interesting series of essays, *Le Roman Expérimental,* to justify his belief that human beings were subject to purely physical law, and that he could conduct physical experiments with them in the pages of his novels. The attempt has been made also by others, but it will always be unconvincing, and for an obvious reason. The laws of science require, before they can be valid, a very definite and arbitrary selection of conditions under which life is to be studied. The biologist does this when he examines the origins of life and the mutation of species. The psychologist does this, likewise, when he examines and records nervous reaction to stimuli. But each records certain aspects, narrowly prescribed, of human or animal life. A novel is neither biology nor psychology, but a record of another aspect of human life, and as such only does it have value.

Nor does the novel that tries to be scientific because of its accu-

racy in the observation of life, on this account deserve to be called science. For science is not only accurate, but accurate in the particular character of the observations it wishes to record. In other words, its accuracy is governed by a rigid selection of pertinent details, and these are prescribed by the conditions the scientist sets up to govern his observation. If he is a geologist, for example, he has no concern with the lichens that cover his rock; these, however, are precisely what the botanist wishes to see, and he has no eye for the rock. The novelist who prides himself on his powers of observation of significant detail is doing it, not with the scientist's preoccupation, but with another as purely arbitrary, and is governed by his attitude toward the whole problem of living—an attitude not yet adopted by science. For literature cannot be science, as science and literature have their present preoccupations. There may come a time when their labor will be on parallel or identical lines; but then they will be neither literature nor science, as we understand the terms.[1]

[1] The same truth applies, though for a slightly different reason, to criticism that borrows the methods of science; for example, Taine's effort to discover the secret of greatness in a study of the race, the environment, and the immediate background of the author; as though Darwin's principle of natural selection governed the appearance of genius. Taine's criticism is good or weak in spite of his theory. And where he works his theory least he is best. See his *History of English Literature*, where he tried on a large scale to make his theory explain a national literature. His chapter on Milton is especially illuminating.

Part Two
VALUES

Chapter XI

THE QUESTION OF GENRES

THE CONFUSION OF NAMES—AN EVOLUTION OF TYPES—A TENTATIVE DEFINITION—THE DENIAL OF TYPES—A WORKING HYPOTHESIS—THE TRADITION OF TYPES—SUPERFICIAL GENERALIZATIONS—AN EFFORT AT A DEFINITION—INCOMPLETENESS OF THE ANSWER—TYPES DUE TO RESPONSE OF THE READER.

THERE are times when a thoughtful reader wishes he could lay violent hands upon the machinery of our vocabulary, banish a few words, or at least warp them into a semblance of reasonable meaning, and thus make it possible to speak intelligently about some quite necessary things. This desire is not often more strongly felt than when we come to speak of these things we call "types" of literature, the literary *genres*. Very few offer what we may call even decent visibility. To take an obvious example, we know fairly well what is meant by a biography; but when we compare, for instance, Ludwig's story of Bismarck or Napoleon and Thackeray's *Esmond,* we have to make some rapid readjustments to keep the novel and biography clearly separate. To be sure, *Esmond* is a fictitious character and a minor personage, while the world still feels the effect of the Iron Chancellor and the Man of Destiny. But beyond this fairly large and objective but still largely irrelevant distinction, the "art" of the biographer and of the novelist is at times not essentially dissimilar; and to a person unacquainted with history, both works would be classed under one category.

But here, as I said, we are in the realm of the obvious; what shall we say to Shakespeare's *Henry VI?* Is it history or tragedy?

Or shall we call it drama? To say that in the reign of Elizabeth the theater-goer liked to have his history dramatically set before his eyes does not help us toward a classification. Lodge's *Rosalinde* we may call romance; but what of Shakespeare's *As You Like It?* Does it become comedy when the plot is altered ever so slightly and the characters a bit more convincingly drawn, and the whole made poetic? And if this is comedy, wherein is it like the *Comedy of Errors* or *The Taming of the Shrew?* In other words, if these terms—comedy, drama, biography, novel—have any significance, the meaning to the average thoughtful reader is so inextricably woven in with a mass of irrelevancies that to discover it seems an almost hopeless task.

The hopelessness of the task apparently is not helped by the obvious number of these obtrusive and quarreling phrases. Shakespeare satirized the habit of his day in making fine distinctions in the varieties of the drama—"tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral, scene individable, or poem unlimited." But even without going into grotesque *genres* we have enough to turn a steady head; and we never have the assurance that any list that has been drawn up does not omit an old and respectable type. There are forms for poetry: the lyric, epic, mock-heroic, ode, elegy, epistle, satire; there are the many forms of the drama: tragedy, comedy, farce, tragi-comedy, heroic play; then the multitude of forms of prose: the essay, novel, romance; and the many of all sorts and conditions whose names it would be idle to cumber these pages with. The problem is a heroic one; can we ever hope to arrive at a comprehensive theory of kinds in literature, and an adequate classification and terminology?

It has been the favorite sport of critics from the days of Aristotle to our own time to make the effort to get at such a classification.[1] Perhaps the most painstaking and thorough work ever done on any critical job was that of Julius Cæsar Scaliger in his

[1] Aristotle was moderate, if we may judge by later critics. In poetry he found only three types worthy of notice—tragedy, comedy, and the epic. It is curious that he nowhere, except as he touched on the chorus, discussed the lyric. One wonders why. Was it beneath his notice? Did he disapprove? Surely Pindar was something "serious" and might have been mentioned.

effort to solve this problem. And if ever a man, after the first owner, seemed to deserve the emperor's name and surname, it was this sober-minded Italian; but posterity has forgotten him and his labors. Before him Aristotle, Horace, and Dante—to name only those whom everyone knows—had tried it. After Scaliger, with the feeling that new times disclose new facets of the problem, nearly every critic, for Coleridge is a significant exception, took a shot at the favorite target—Boileau, Dryden, Le Bossu, Lessing—again to name only the most important. In our own time also, supported by the new theory of evolution, the same effort has been made by the scholarly and tireless Frenchman, Brunetière.

With Brunetière, the effort to arrive at a logical and consistent theory of types was a vital and historically important part of his contribution to the history of criticism. It was due, in part at least, to his scientific interest and the scientific bent of the age. What he desired was to establish the fact of an evolution of the literary *genres,* as palpable as the fact of evolution in nature. Modifications in the type he tried to discover in the influences due to race, to the special background of an age, and to the special genius of the individual. Thus the gradual "story" of the lyric or the drama, as also of the novel, is due to a species of "natural selection," like that described for the biological world by Darwin.

According to this theory, the history of the sonnet, for example, from the time of Dante to Wordsworth, would be the story of the various influences it had been subjected to: the mediæval Italian in Dante; the early Renaissance in Petrarch; the later French in Ronsard; the Elizabethan English in Shakespeare and Spenser; the Revolutionary English in Milton; and the English Romantic in Wordsworth. In other words, the critic would see in this special form of poetry more than the genius of the author—the spirit of the people and the particular age.

That there were such things as literary types he never doubted, and that they were not merely "arbitrary categories." "A *genre* . . . is a tendency of the human mind (*tendance de l'esprit humain*)," so writes Emile Faguet in an article on Brunetière's

work; "it is a tendency of the mind which has become a *genre,* and it is a *genre* which has found its laws; but at bottom it remains always a tendency of the mind." In other words, we must look to the various ways in which a mind works with its experiences for the origins and laws of all literary *genres.* We should expect then, so Brunetière argues, that they begin from slight modifications of what were originally more or less simple and homogeneous forms. We are not now interested in origins; but there is at least one thing in this definition by Faguet that I shall come back to later.

It was with the idea of making a comprehensive survey of the various types in French literature that Brunetière wrote his history of French criticism, *L'Évolution des Genres,* and his books on the French drama, lyric, and novel. But a critic of his volumes finds before long that the theory does not work of itself, as a good scientific theory should, but that its author must make it work; that is, it is not the result of a careful survey of all the various literary facts, as the theory of natural selection in biology was the result of a careful survey of all the available facts in nature, but it was invented first, and then the data gathered to support the theory, and at times even bent into supple obedience. Now this last is the one tendency against which a scientist must always be on his guard; and when a critic wishes to play scientist and then insists on occasion on seeing only such things in the works before him as are relevant to his theory and dismissing the irrelevant, or seeing only the irrelevant and dismissing the valuable, it is not to be wondered at if a hard-hearted scoffer arises to accuse the scholar of setting up abstractions in the place of realities.

But even if there are signs that the effort to prove the evolution of the drama and to discover its laws does not quite make itself convincing, can we yet find that there is such a thing as a *"genre tranché,"* a type to which there is conformity, and to which there should be conformity; and that lack of conformity to the type has its perils? Is there such a thing as tragedy, or comedy,

or the lyric? Is there such a clearly distinguishable *"tendance de l'esprit humain,"* as Faguet calls it; and if so, can we adequately describe it as it reveals itself in its literary forms? If no answer can be found to these questions, the whole discussion of literary types, as literary types, is as unedifying as the old scholastic dispute about needles and angels.

Of late years there have been many who have warmly urged that we are now old enough to know an abstraction when we see it, and to recognize its utter worthlessness. I can't do better here than repeat the magnificent gesture of self-denial with which one of our critics today dismisses the whole crew of types to a literary limbo. He gets his cue from Croce:

> We have done with the *genres,* or literary kinds. Their history is inseparably bound up with that of the classical rules. Certain works of literature have a general resemblance and are loosely classed together (for the sake of convenience) as lyric, comedy, tragedy, epic, pastoral, and the like; the classicists made of each of these divisions a fixed norm governed by inviolable laws. The separation of the *genres* was a consequence of this law of classicism: comedy should not be mingled with tragedy, nor epic with lyric. But no sooner was the law enunciated than it was broken by an artist impatient or ignorant of its restraints, and the critics have been obliged to explain away these violations of their laws, or gradually to change the laws themselves. But if art is organic expression, and every work of art is to be interrogated with the question, "What has it expressed, and how completely?" there is no place for the question, whether it has conformed to some convenient classification of critics or to some law derived from this classification. . . . There are not, therefore, only three, or ten, or a hundred literary kinds; there are as many kinds as there are individual poets. . . . There is no objection to the use of the word tragic as a convenient label for somewhat similar poems, but to find laws for the tragic and to test creative artists by such laws as these is simply to give a more abstract form to the outworn classical conception of dramatic rules.[1]

[1] J. E. Spingarn, *Creative Criticism;* reprinted by permission of Harcourt, Brace and Company, Inc.

I have quoted somewhat extensively, as in this passage we can find the summary of the argument used to break down the system hundreds of years of classical criticism had set up.

At first sight it seems a little uncomfortable to think of tragedy, comedy, and the rest of the train as merely "convenient labels for somewhat similar poems." There was at least something generous and homelike and pleasantly hospitable about the old system of classification; every poem that conformed had a home to come to and agreeable friends to welcome it, and an adequate code of manners to live up to. It was like placing people and characterizing them according to the locality or the nation to which they belonged, in the days when there were homogeneous localities and nations, before the world became a mixing bowl for Parthians, Medes, and Elamites, and dwellers beyond Mesopotamia. If O'Neill is not to be judged by the principles of tragedy, as old-fashioned critics judged Shakespeare and Sophocles, how is one to discover whether he is in the tradition? And without this knowledge, again there rises the old question of the difficulty of pointing out his value.

Indeed such questions do puzzle, and will continue, doubtless, to puzzle wiser heads than ours. For the obvious fact is that no one can take each separate experience even in a single day's life as a perfectly unique adventure. That each act, from the time we open our eyes on a morning until we close them again at night, is utterly unlike any other act in any other possible existence, we can most fervently believe; but at the same time, unless we group our acts and accept experience as it comes classified for us by some almost automatic act of classification, we shall live poor lives indeed and be the sport of every circumstance. For we master the art of living by acquiring certain behaviors accommodated to certain more or less homogeneous groups of experiences. To put it concretely, certain incidents call out the response of pity, others of laughter, others of anger. In this respect those of the first group we roughly classify as pitiful, though to a person of a somewhat different cast of mind they may appear ludicrous. Or, in a word, we individually classify

experience as it calls out a more or less calculable response; and though we differ somewhat in the manner in which a certain incident will call out a response, in the main, through environment and heredity, we are far more nearly alike in our responses than the impressionists would lead us to believe.

It is, as I said a moment ago, only as we are thus enabled to short-cut the experience and thus rapidly to classify it through our quick response, that we are enabled to get through a day's business without being utterly bewildered by life's strangeness and complexity. It would be terrifying indeed were it necessary for us to undergo each experience as an utterly new adventure in living, for which an utterly new response had to be discovered. One at times has this sense of inadequacy when one is thrown unprepared into strange company or is left alone in a foreign city. It is like the shock of the novice who suddenly discovers that he has swum out beyond his depth. Even with a strange experience we instinctively look for familiar signs by which we can judge its character and make ready the response; for we judge not by novelty but by what is familiar, and our response is called out, not by the unique or bizarre, but by the well known.

The same general habit can easily be detected in our responses to the experiences of literature. And it is precisely of this, I suspect, that Faguet is thinking when he speaks of literary types as at bottom due to a "tendency of the human mind." I am not now thinking of the ever-increasing and formidable list of names of literary types, nor of the learned dissertations that have been written about them, but of the few or many categories we all more or less unconsciously possess, and to which almost instantly we refer the book or the poem we happen to be reading. Only with most of us these categories are loose and unsatisfactory, being the result of careless generalization; at best, they are hopelessly incomplete. In consequence, a large part of the trouble of criticism has been, in this question of literary *genres,* that it has accepted these more or less unconscious and nearly always careless generalizations, made usually by inadequate readers or before the day of readers and critics, and has attempted to use them

in what purports to be a scientific classification of literature. But physical or biological science, even in its crudest days when it remained purely descriptive, did not do things in this haphazard manner. Even Linnæus in his efforts at a classification of botanical species began by throwing away all popular botanical knowledge, and went to work with a microscope and an open mind.

But the names given to literary types, on the other hand, are often not the result of even superficial generalization; they are instead not much more than the inheritance of a long tradition which finds little in common between their early and later use. For example, we are by no means certain just what tragedy and comedy meant to ancient Greece before Æschylus and Aristophanes; the eclogue meant something to Theocritus, but what did the word convey to the Greek shepherds of the fifth or sixth centuries B.C.? Romance had a fairly definite connotation for the Middle Ages, but Hawthorne's or Thomas Mann's use of the word would have staggered a contemporary of Dante. And why did Dante call his poem the *Comedy?* Certainly he was not using the word as it had been used in ancient Greece or Rome. Boccaccio would have found it difficult to discover any blood relationship between one of his *novelle* and Anderson's *Dark Laughter.* Further, if we are anxious to look for an evolution of *genres,* it is as easy to see the unfolding of the tradition of tragedy in novels like those of Dostoevski and Tolstoy as it is in dramas like those of Ibsen and Gorky. Nor does one have to be well acquainted with the story of English literature to have discovered how the term "essay" has been used in quite incompatible senses by Locke and Lamb. But none of the writers who used these terms was doing anything more than taking the word as it was currently used in his time. None, I suspect, had any real notion that it "classified" his work, or that by using it he was putting himself into a tradition by which he was to be judged.

It is easy enough now, I believe, to lay a finger upon the source of the trouble with this interesting problem. Criticism, like the old science, has been more concerned with superficial description

of the type, as it had appeared in a limited number of literatures and writers. For example, Horace in his *Epistle to the Pisos* has described carefully the themes for tragedy, the number of acts, and the use of the chorus. Later critics in the seventeenth century added the rule of the unities for both tragedy and comedy, and warned against mixing the types. For all this they had the justification of a goodly part (not, by any manner of means, of all) of Greek tragedy and of the Latin Seneca and of their imitators in the Renaissance, except bold innovators like the Elizabethans in England, Hardy and Rotrou in France, and Lope and Calderon in Spain. To such radical aberrations they closed their eyes because they liked the old method better or thought it more logical. But they were never quite consistent; Boileau went even so far as to assert that all tragedies should have love as their theme, forgetting for the moment his favorite Greeks and Seneca. In a similar way the classification of epics was made on the question of subject matter and the manner of the verse and plot of Homer and Virgil. In other words, until recent years nearly all efforts at classification were made on the manner of the communication or on the theme rather than on the quality of the experience communicated. And the result to our use of terms has been disastrous.

To be sure, the first great critic, Aristotle, was not unaware of this important distinction. In his description of tragedy and comedy he went to the heart of the matter and attempted to point out the significance of the quality of the tragic and comic experiences. But this, the most important part of his definitions, his commentators usually misunderstood, and saw in these two most important of literary types only subdivisions of the drama, as indeed Aristotle had treated them. In consequence it was the effort to fit discussions of tragedy and comedy, as he defined them, into a scheme with the other varieties of types, that has caused trouble from the earliest times to this. For tragedy and comedy, as Aristotle associated them with the impulses of pity and terror, and the motive of laughter, are convenient and very valuable descriptions of two quite different mental experiences.

There are, in addition, others, like satire, with its appropriate and easily identifiable attitudes of contempt, bitterness or hate.

On the other hand, such *genres* as epic, lyric, pastoral, elegy, novel, drama, and essay, may be comic, tragic, satiric or nearly anything else that the author finds in the experience. This haphazard character is especially true of the novel, into which may enter almost any variety of impulse or attitude the human imagination is capable of; and it takes no large reading of novels to discover the curious miscellaneousness of this late newcomer into the field of literature. For all of these so-called types are not types of experience, as we usually classify experience, but methods of communicating experience, and methods whose popularity depends on certain ascertainable and changing conditions in the public taste. One is nearly as well justified in calling the cinema a type, in this sense, as the novel; or the "comic strip" likewise, for it may have some remote literary aspirations. Even the lyric, which at first sight seems to represent a true type, is not a clear description of the quality of an experience, but rather of its manner and its immediacy. It may have any flavor from the tragic to the satiric; and though often without external plot, and always brief, yet in its essence it often tells as complete a story of hope or despair, of light-heartedness or cynicism, as the longest drama or novel.

Furthermore, it is equally futile to try to arrive at any classification of *genres* by the subject matter or plot. We sometimes try to do this by the use of the term elegy to cover such poems as deal wistfully with the theme of human mortality; or we think of the essay as the exploitation of one's personal opinions and attitudes, or of the pastoral as an episode in the lives of alleged shepherds and shepherdesses. And as they are generally used, the terms tragedy and comedy are thought by the careless to refer to plots that have to do with events with a sad or a happy ending.

Thus we have at least three different and overlapping methods by which we arrive at a classification of these literary types: the quality of the mental experience, the form of the communication, and the subject matter of the communication. Is it any wonder

that with this utterly unscientific mode of procedure we should arrive at results that are equally unsatisfactory? Under these circumstances a poem like Milton's *Lycidas* may be called with equal appropriateness an elegy, a lyric, a satire, and a pastoral. What are we to do with a problem so hopeless as this, especially as it is quite beyond our powers, and perhaps also our right, to do what the physical scientist can always do, to invent a new terminology or to shift the meaning of the old to suit a more critical point of view? There is at least one thing, however, we can do; and that is to use these words as only partly accurate descriptions of certain more or less relevant type characteristics.

To arrive at a satisfactory theory of literary types one must go first, not to the works of literature, but to the human mind, and make the effort to arrive at some more or less adequate generalizations of the *"tendances de l'esprit humain"* to respond to the urge of experience. And in this task the critic will have to call in the aid of a more adequate psychology than we possess at present. But it may be interesting and not without some relevancy to suggest a quite tentative and incomplete sketch of a possible method, which may offer an additional advantage by showing the relation of type to type. It will first of all be necessary to dismiss from the mind all differences between works due to the manner of the communication, or all differences merely of subject matter, and attempt to study the experience itself, the chief of the varied impulses aroused, and the final attitude or response of the reader. In other words, what is of chief concern here is only the quality of the experience. From this point of view one can find, for example, tragedy in a biography—for instance, of Mary, Queen of Scots—or comedy in a lyric or essay.

In the table below I have grouped the impulses and mental attitudes under the caption, *motive,* and by it I mean the impelling force of the experience and its general quality. I give only the chief motive; subsidiary ones will further change the quality of the experience, and modify the type. It is not to be expected,

of course, that these motives will not admit of a large amount of variation even when we are dealing with works which very closely resemble each other. No class will be, or can be, perfectly homogeneous. In the examples given of each type I have selected only works that are well known.

Motive	*Class or Type*	*Examples*
1. Joy (and admiration)		Lyrics like many by Wordsworth, *e.g.*, *Daffodils*, *Tintern Abbey*, or by Keats or Shelley; or Dante's *Paradiso*
2. Admiration (with this may be added the motive of fear)	Serious romance Melodrama	Novel of adventure, Beowulf (1st part), Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*
3. Admiration and terror	Good melodrama	Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*
4. Terror and pity, and admiration	Great tragedy	*Œdipus, the King*, *Agamemnon*, Shakespeare's great tragedies, *Lear*, etc.
5. Pity (and slighter fear)	Slighter tragedy	Racine's plays, many of Euripides', as the *Alcestis;* Hauptmann's *Hannele*, and *Sunken Bell*
6. Pity and admiration and slighter fear	Romantic tragedy	Corneille's *Cid*, Schiller's *Wilhelm Tell*
7. Pity alone	The pathetic	A good deal of Thomas Hardy. Pity becomes sentimental in Dickens
8. Pity dropped, in its place cold interest in fact	"Scientific" realism	Many modern realistic novels
9. Humor (*i.e.*, sympathy) changes to good-natured laughter of satisfied interest [a]	Romantic comedy and lighter romance	Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, etc.; most of so-called romantic novels, with less serious complications—love stories
10. Humor (laughter joined with sympathy)	Sympathetic comedy	Wordsworth's *Cumberland Beggar*, George Eliot's *Adam Bede*, Rostand's *Cyrano*
11. Laughter of derision (sympathy lost) or of grotesque surprise	Comedy (farce or caricature)	Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*, Plautus, Terence, Aristophanes (in part)
12. Laughter of cynical indifference	Comedy	Molière's *Misanthrope* (as played in the Seventeenth century), *Omar Khayyám;* a good deal of modern realism
13. Laughter of cynicism giving place to hate or contempt	Satire	Juvenal

[a] See Chapter XIII, Comedy, p. 285.

The first thing to be noted about this scheme is its obvious incompleteness. And the only excuse for offering it is that it may suggest some discussion and methods for improvement. One notes in it the large part occupied by tragedy, in its various shades, and comedy; and this fact, I think, is correct. The tragic and the comic attitudes are the most generous and among the most valuable of all so-called literary attitudes; and at the same time the farthest removed from the ordinary, commonplace acceptance of life. To understand this fully we shall have to wait for the next two chapters.

What is of chief value in a table like this seems to be the opportunity to see how by slight shifting or changing of the motive we tend to pass from type to type. Certainly there is little in common in subject matter between the nature poems of Wordsworth and the beatific vision in Dante's *Paradiso;* but the mental experience of sheer joy in both, and the going out of the human spirit to grasp with eagerness the universe it wishes to make its own, have almost everything in common.[1] Its very opposite, the refusal to accept and the active resentment against a hostile and ugly world, is the experience of hate. In Juvenal it takes the form of bitter laughter and a gathering of one's skirts about one. There is no terror in this attitude, for the poet can find nothing to dread. Between these lie the two large realms of comedy and tragedy, the one governed in chief by the impulses of pity and terror or softer dread, the other by the attitude of laughter in its many aspects. And as a central point in the whole scheme, the apathetic interest in the experience for its own sake, empty of almost all other impulse and acting as the bridge between what may be described as the more serious and larger and the lighter and more purely human aspects of experience.

In this last we have one further interesting suggestion. In the upper group in general we see man in the larger manifestations of his problems and personality—not superhuman as we

[1] I hope the reader will see that I am not raising here the question of relative value.

usually use the word, but at least more serious than in his daily converse. The plots, if there are such, deal with the larger issues of life, and sometimes the more unusual, and the characters impress one as better, as Aristotle uses the word in his *Poetics,* or more admirable, than the ordinary run of human beings. In the lower group we see human nature more nearly in its general human aspect, as it presents itself in the ordinary complexities of daily life, purified to be sure of irrelevancies and made more convincing, but human nature as we know it, or even human nature in its least attractive aspects. This does not mean necessarily that the upper group is *per se* a higher realm of literature than the lower, though we shall later be compelled to ascribe a very high worth to great tragedy. "What a piece of work is man," tragedy cries out as it shows us the sufferings and bitterness of a life wasted. "What a piece of work is man," comedy replies with its laughing shrug of the shoulders, as it points to the grotesque irrelevancies and incongruous absurdities that make up the business of living.

Finally, one thing more ought now to be obvious, the relatively small number of the *genres tranchés,* clear-cut types, we find in literature. It could hardly be otherwise. A long novel, even like Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain,* where the tone is nearly uniform, cannot find itself so unmixed an experience as, let us say, one of Aristophanes' comedies or Sophocles' tragedies. Even in Shakespeare's tragedies we find comic scenes whose purpose we shall see is of the utmost significance to the tragic experience. A poem like Homer's *Iliad,* though in the main it exploits the impulse of admiration, has frequent tragic episodes and even comic; and most appropriately, for it, like a novel, is a large transcript of life, and correspondingly multifarious. Milton's *Paradise Lost* is tragic, and yet has scenes of pure pathos and also of lovely joy. Dante's *Divine Comedy* runs the whole gamut of emotive experience from hate to joy. Perhaps no work of literature has ever been, or can ever be again, so completely a compendium of the totality of human experience.

One word more—the type to which an experience belongs is

due not to the external incidents, but to the response of the reader. It is obvious, I think, to the reader of Elizabethan drama that Shakespeare at least planned his *Merchant of Venice* as a comedy; but before he had gone far the comic character of Shylock began to acquire a larger significance and personality, until in the fourth act, distressed by his loss, breathing revenge, bewildered by an unjust decision, and jeered at by his enemies, he stands before us, not a comic nor pathetic but almost a tragic figure, crushed by circumstance, yet asserting the worth of his personality, best in his keenest suffering. Doubtless with Gratiano and his scoffing fellows the empty spectators of the Globe Theatre rocked with comic laughter as Shylock writhed in agony. We may not cast a stone, for we are not yet without sin; but to us the case of Shylock has undergone a whole hemisphere of change; and as we sit through the soft-moonlit scenes of lyric joy in the fifth act we cannot forget that under this vineyard of revelry are the lurid passages of a volcano, and beneath these pleasant hillsides of Belmont the earth shrinks in fear. So much have three hundred years and a larger humanitarian outlook done for even Shakespeare.

Shakespeare's *King Lear* is tragic, without any possibility of cavil—perhaps, and I am willing to use superlatives, the greatest tragedy ever written—but who would in real life find an old man cast off by undutiful daughters more than pathetic, and the old man with an ungovernable temper a Plautus could have found even farcically comic. Balzac in his *Père Goriot,* taking the same cue—the eternal theme of doting and deluded parenthood—finds the thing sordid, and a subject for almost cynical indifference. It is this difference in attitude, a difference that makes all the difference in the world, that is the source of the dramatic power of Browning's *Ring and the Book*. There we have a sordid enough murder, a thing that would give our tabloid cameras a week of frenzied exercise, set forth in a series of attitudes that rise from cynical irony to tragedy.[1]

[1] There is a sentence or two worth quoting in this connection in August Boeckh's *Encyclopädie und Methodologie der Philogischen Wissenschaften,* a book with a forbidding title: "Genius itself makes its own rules for the genus, criticism of the

A death, or the loss of a world, may, as in Shakespeare or Sophocles, be an eternal blazon that will "harrow up the soul and freeze the blood," or it may be no more than the empty rustle of charred papers in a burned-out grate, where "all is but toys" and there is "nothing serious in mortality." Or we may read into it a homily and see the workings of an eternal providence and a stern judge:

> The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices
> Make instruments to plague us.

It is ourselves, as we experience the incidents and endow with personality the characters, who give to the story a name and discover for it its type.[1]

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genus must proceed accordingly. . . . The working of genius and creative beauty is reducible to no formula. . . . The types and kinds of poetry and of prose itself are also only relative forms, and according to the peculiar aim of each work tend to fade into each other."

[1] These facts must be carefully borne in mind before one begins a study of these types. In the chapters that follow tragedy, comedy, and satire are treated separately as types. In the discussion of the Epic and the Novel, as well as of the Lyric and Essay, it will be necessary to cut across the idea of types and discuss them as modes of communication. I am quite aware of the utterly unscientific mode of this approach. But the results of the study I hope will be clear.

Chapter XII

TRAGEDY

THE PLEASURE IN TRAGEDY—THE SCOPE OF TRAGEDY—ORIGINS—THE HEBREW MIND—THE ORIENTAL MIND—THE GREEK MIND AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL—TRAGEDY A REBELLION—TRAGEDY A DEMAND—THE THEORY OF HEGEL—POETIC JUSTICE—SCHOPENHAUER—MODERN ADAPTATIONS OF SCHOPENHAUER—NIETZSCHE—ARISTOTLE—PITY AND TERROR—THE KATHARSIS—TRAGEDY SERIOUS—THE TRAGIC FLAW—THE DEMAND FOR INTELLIGIBILITY—SHAKESPEARE—THE TRAGIC CONFLICT—TRAGIC SUFFERING—IRONY—TRAGEDY A REVELATION OF PERSONALITY.

How can one bring oneself to enjoy tragedy? At its easiest it is not a simple experience. And there are many people, far more than might confess it, who build themselves dikes, as it were, to shut out unpleasant experience, who persist in a naïve trust that this life is an agreeable *fête-champêtre,* a sort of Sunday-school picnic, presided over by just and scrupulous overseers. To such the words of Job's comforters are a complete philosophy of life:

> Behold, God will not cast away a perfect man,
> Neither will he uphold the evil-doers,
> He will yet fill thy mouth with laughter,
> And thy lips with shouting.

How can such an one discover anything but pain in the agony of a Lear?

> And my poor fool is hang'd. No, no, no life!
> Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life,
> And thou no breath at all?

Or what can be less endurable than the heartbroken Œdipus, blinded by his own hands, taking his farewell of his two young daughters?

> What say I? Can it be my pretty ones
> Whose sobs I hear? . . .
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Though I cannot behold you, I must weep
> In thinking of the evil days to come.
> The slights and wrongs that men will put upon you.

Or is it true, on the other hand, as Rousseau, the philosopher of the "feeling heart," would have it, that there is an essential sadism in man which makes him love pain, gloat over gladiatorial shows, and exult over the tragic suffering of others? Is the value of tragedy a perverted humanity exploiting an essential blood lust, a refined triumph of the beast in man? There have been many with such a theory of tragedy, and among them the poet-dramatist Hauptmann, who can see the origin of tragedy in the motive of human sacrifice.

On the other hand, there are those who would find the pleasure of tragedy in the most excellent opportunity it offers for the luxury of sorrow—a masochistic desire to inflict pain on oneself, like the orgies of the flagellants in the Middle Ages, or like thrusting one's tongue into an aching tooth. There are such things, and they may be, in part at least, responsible for some attitudes toward tragedy; but if tragedy as an experience is no more than a fulfillment of the desire to see pain and to feel its luxury, its value is purely negative, and one might do well to subscribe to the philosophy of Pippa and Job's comforters.

There is a further remark that may be made at the beginning. A tragedy does not need to end unhappily; there are many—nearly half—of the Greek tragedies that end with a happy reconciliation—for example, Sophocles' *Philoctetes* and Euripides' *Alcestis*. It is a merely superficial criticism that would unite in a perpetual wedlock tragedy and catastrophe. It was with this delicious *naïveté* that Francesco da Buti, the commentator on

Dante, deriving tragedy from the Greek word for "goat song," wrote that like the goat it was prosperous and shaggy before, but miserably bald behind.[1] But whether this definition be just or not to the goat is not for me to decide; but it needlessly restricts the tragic experience, and puts the emphasis on what is sometimes quite irrelevant—the ending. A death can, in some tragedies, be a glorious release, and far from unhappy either for the character or spectator, as for example, that in *Œdipus at Colonos* or in Goethe's *Faust.* Or again, the tragedy may end with a reconciliation that yet carries with it a great deal of suppressed unhappiness, as in Corneille's *Cid.* Or the final catastrophe may leave us with the calm assurance of its utter inevitability, and the thought that what has been accomplished is for the best, as in Milton's *Samson:*

> His servants He, with new acquist
> Of true experience from this great event,
> With peace and consolation hath dismissed,
> And calm of mind, all passion spent.

We shall have to seek farther than in tales that end unhappily and the accounts of sudden death and disaster, for the secret of the tragic experience—else one would need to go no farther than today's newspaper.

Nor in the discussion of tragedy are we justified in limiting our search to the drama. If by common consent there be tragedy in Sophocles' *Antigone,* and Shakespeare's *Othello,* or Ibsen's *Rosmersholm,* and O'Neill's *Hairy Ape,* we are hardly justified in excluding Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter,* or Dostoevski's *Crime and Punishment,* and Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina.* Though these last two novels are long drawn out, and the stage is set and reset time and again before the final cataclysm, the experience as a whole compared with that of the dramas is every whit as devastating in its stark seriousness. The end is the same though the means be more leisurely and the canvas charged with richer details from the panorama of life. Nor can we deny the term

[1] Quoted by F. L. Lucas in "Tragedy," Hogarth Lectures.

tragic to a brief lyric that for a moment lays bare the heart of things and gives a glimpse, though but a fleeting one, of "the antagonism that is the heart of the world." One feels it in this sonnet by Shakespeare:

> The expense of spirit in a waste of shame
> Is lust in action; and, till action, lust
> Is perjur'd, murderous, bloody, full of blame,
> Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust;
> Enjoy'd no sooner but despised straight,
> Past reason hunted, and, no sooner had,
> Past reason hated, as a swallow'd bait
> On purpose laid to make the taker mad:
> Mad in pursuit, and in possession so;
> Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme;
> A bliss in proof, and, prov'd, a very woe;
> Before, a joy propos'd; behind, a dream.
>
> All this the world well knows; yet none knows well
> To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell.

Such things, whether long or short, whether drama, novel, or lyric, and known by one *"che pensi e pianga e scriva,"* who thinks and weeps and writes, are tragedy. Even a very brief narrative may have in it all the motives of tragedy, so deeply furrowed that centuries may not efface their traces. I am thinking of the trifle of a confession Dante puts into the mouth of Francesca in the second circle of the Inferno. She has but a moment, before the resistless blast will again catch her and her lover, tossing them for eternity; yet in this respite granted to the *"anime affannate,"* she tells a story that for sheer power has been the despair of all but one poet who would write the tragedy of love.

A great deal has been written about the origins of tragedy, and especially of that most nearly perfect specimen, the Greek; and most of it, so far as concerns literary criticism, is beside the mark. Death and suffering are universal experiences, and, with the mystery of birth, the greatest of enigmas. It is not to be wondered at that early with many people there was burned deep

into their consciousness the idea of a world where all is not as it should be, and that mortal life at best is a perilous adventure or a pilgrimage to a shrine of sorrow.

> This world nis but a thurghfare ful of wo,
> And we ben pilgrimes, passinge to and fro.

It is also not to be wondered at that during early folk festivals the songs of poets, known or unknown, should have been a part of a communal service, sung by the community and acted with symbolic dancing and gestures. Favorite stories of heroes or gods, the legendary treasure of all peoples, would find a prominent place in these communal services, for religious they were, as were all early festivals, and communal, for there was yet no sharp distinction between actor and spectator. It is out of these things, which may be observed among any more or less primitive peoples, that by a happy combination of genius and poetic power came that most stupendous of all literary forms, Greek tragedy.

Its communal nature may yet be discovered in its form, as also its purely religious origin. It was until quite late acted only on days of religious solemnity. Its subject matter was limited to the legendary history of Greece or to its mythical gods and heroes. And the chorus which has puzzled many critics was no more than the active reminiscence of the old communal character of the service, the community itself taking part in the tragic liturgy. It was not the poet's comment on the tragedy, but the people's; it was not an ideal spectator, but the people itself taking its part in the action. The spectators in the rows of seats beyond the orchestra were unreal and unnecessary so far as the play was concerned. The spectator was actor and participator in the story, having the intimate half-knowledge of the significance of the action of the community, which knows the characters personally and such of their motives as may be revealed, and no more. Its comments, therefore, are those of friends who see and know and feel, but only so much as may be granted to friends. But they cannot influence the cause of the action, for they are the com-

munity, and the great actors have motives that are beyond and behind their control.

It is this communal origin that will also explain the curious symbolism of the Greek acting and music. Realistic acting as we know it on the stage is something that the Greek never dreamed of, and it would have been impossible under the conditions of the Greek theatre, at least in tragedy. In its place there were the graceful and symbolical poses, and musical declamations, and choral chants, which, though they might at first bewilder a modern audience, must have been fully as potent in rousing the desired emotive response as the finest of realistic acting. But all of these symbolisms of Greek tragedy go back unmistakably to the old communal festival and the tragic song and dance.

An excellent example of what this early festival must have resembled may be seen in the song of Deborah, Judges v. The song is in celebration of a marvelous deliverance of the young Israel from terrific odds, a battle in which the newly arrived and yet undisciplined tribes were led by a woman; and the enthusiasm broke forth into a spontaneous "pageant of victory." It is all song, dialogue, and action, a story of the fight, the exultation of victory, and the vindictiveness of triumphant hate. These lines correspond to the Greek choral chants:

> They fought from heaven,
> The stars in their courses fought against Sisera.
> The river Kishon swept them away,—
> That ancient river, the river Kishon!
>
> O my soul, march on with strength!
> Then did the horsehoofs stamp
> By reason of the prancings,
> The prancings of their strong ones.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> So let all thine enemies perish, O LORD:
> But let them that love him be as the sun when he
> goeth forth in his might!

There are in this brief poem all the makings of tragic drama, but the Hebrew theological mind took another course, a direction that did not favor tragedy.

For the attitude of the orthodox Hebrew and that of the European Greek is nowhere seen to be so antagonistic as in this —the Hebrew was unable to rise to the heights of tragedy. There are enough examples of man's tragic failure in Hebrew myth and history to furnish a national tragedy as rich as that of Greece. The story of the first man and woman, who hid themselves before the voice of Yahweh in the Garden; the cry of Cain, "My punishment is greater than I can bear"; the marvelous epic of the disillusioned and distracted Saul cast away on Mount Gilboa; of David all day with his face in his hands moaning, "My son Absalom, Absalom my son, would I had died for thee, Absalom my son"; the priest and woman-ridden Solomon; Rehoboam, son of Solomon, whose little finger would be heavier than his father's thigh—the list is as long as the tragic history of the Old Testament and the race; and yet there is no tragedy, save that of Job, written, one suspects, by a later Hellenized Jew in the pagan city of Alexandria, and adulterated by the pious hands of scribes with orthodox interpolations. What shall we say of this national literature, rich in seed and fertile in soil, but pitiful in harvest?

The answer is to be found in the *Mullahs* of Yahweh, the "prophets" of the Lord, the Semitic desert eremites, bitten with the fiery zeal of the jealous Yahweh of wrath, and lost in the abyss that separates the divine and the human, who fettered the free imagination of a people that even before the time of Homer were beginning to find themselves.

> What is man that thou art mindful of him,
> Or the son of man that thou visitest him?
> Behold, Yahweh is great, and we know him not;
> Who can say, "Thou hast wrought unrighteousness?"

The suffering of Adam, Cain, Saul, and the other heroes of Hebrew myth and history becomes divine justice meted out in

full measure for their sins. Sin and retribution and the wrath of an avenging deity are not the subjects of tragedy; they are the workings rather of a penal code. Man to the orthodox Hebrew is too frail, his day is like grass, "like a flower of the field he is cut down" and "the place thereof shall know him no more." He is too insignificant for tragedy, and his bubbling cry as he sinks in the abyss is his only epitaph, and his gesture of despair a vindication of divine justice. "Will a man justify himself against God?"

This was the theology that these poets and prophets brought with them from their sojourn in the sun-bitten and wind-swept deserts—Samuel, Nathan, Elijah, Jonah. They were fighting men, too, and worthy our respect, but intoxicated with a divine frenzy which left little room for human values. With them tragedy died before it was born; over its empty grave they erected as a cenotaph a stubborn code of theological ethics.

Nor can we look for tragedy in a literature like that of India, and I speak of India here, for again its theory of life is making itself felt in both Europe and America, a wave of that intermittent but still persistent invasion of the West by the Orient. Let me illustrate—I shall never forget a beggar I saw at some little railroad station in Central India. He was down on all fours like a dog. His thighs were of the thickness of a lady's wrist, his chest curved sharply like a dog's, and he walked thus with head thrust forward on his thin neck gazing eagerly into the train windows as they passed.

"God has given thee a cruel portion in this life," I said to him pityingly as he halted before my compartment. "He will doubtless recompense thee in the next." All India believes devotedly in the doctrine of reincarnation and transmigration of souls.

But he broke in with a polite gesture, "Stop, *Sahib,* God has been very good to me in this life. This maimed body of mine has been given me to be an object of compassion to all that pass. They give an alms and acquire merit—and I, too, have

acquired merit. No, no, *Sahib,* the talk is not of cruelty but of blessings."

Against this picture of a very real beggar who spoke the philosophy of life of India as clearly as the *Upanishads,* can be set these verses of the *Bhagavat Gita,* the Indian *Song of Songs,* spoken by the Lord *Shri Krishna* himself to Arjuna, the hero, about to go into battle:

As a man lays aside outworn garments and takes others that are new, so the Body-dweller puts away outworn bodies and goes to others that are new.

Holding in indifference alike pleasure and pain, gain and loss, conquest and defeat, so make thyself ready.

Indifference is the Rule.

As a lamp in a windless spot flickers not, such is the likeness that is told of the strict-minded Man of the Rule.

For Knowledge has more happiness than constant labor; meditation is more excellent than knowledge; surrender of the fruits of Works than meditation; after surrender, peace comes straightway.

[But] Fieriness, know thou, is in essence passion, and is sprung from yearnings and clingings; it fetters the body's tenant with the attachment of works.

Greed, activity, undertaking of works, restlessness, yearning, these arise when Fieriness has waxed full.

But from these last also comes tragedy. How to a people whose philosophy of life denies the worth of passion and activity and even personality, nay, even regards them as the fruit of *Maya,* illusion, can there be revealed any seriousness or significance in those experiences where personality strips for contest with forces whose power it may not know or measure?

One of the most interesting tales my nurse ever told was of a prince and princess, each of whom had seen the other in a dream

and had fallen madly in love with the vision. After many years and incredible labor the young man finally discovered and won the princess. And when they were united, so great was their bliss that each in his heart uttered the prayer that this supreme moment might be their last. Life thereafter could be only an anticlimax. And Shankar, Shiva Mahadeo, hearing their prayer, with one glance of his eyes consumed them to ashes. But this, too, is not tragedy—it is India's answer to *Romeo and Juliet,* for they, unlike the romantic Western lovers, loved and loved wisely.

For there can be no tragedy for a people that have no problem of evil, and into whose theories of life doubt never enters. "Banish evil," said Nietzsche, "and it will go hard with the writers of tragedy"; for with its loss there follows that of their theme. To the Hebrew, evil was only disobedience, as it has been since also to many centuries of Christian creed. There is no evil, save *Maya,* the spirit of illusion, exclaims the orthodox Hindu. And though there is a hemisphere of difference between the ethical creed of the Hebrew and the poetic pantheism of India, for both there is one important common gap in experience—neither has known the meaning of tragedy.

It was the Greek who first dropped a plummet into the depths of the problem of evil, and though the abyss be beyond human ken, from its darkness he brought up much that has been of profoundest significance to the human race. It is essential to remember that there was tragedy in Greek poetry before Æschylus; that there is tragedy in both Greek poetry and prose after Euripides; that of the three tragic poets, Æschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, we have only a scant handful of plays out of many score; and that there were other tragic poets whose names were spoken respectfully for centuries, though today only the briefest fragments of their work remain. It is idle, then, to attempt to generalize from the few samples that we have today as precious relics of a lost harvest.

Nor do these three poets have a strong family resemblance. Æschlyus is as different from Sophocles as both are from Eurip-

ides. Between the first and the third, though in time there is a gap of less than half a century, there is a change as vivid as between Shakespeare and Racine. Nor are the plays of any one of the three at all easy to fit into one picture. Æschylus' *Prometheus* sits queerly beside his *Seven Against Thebes;* and Sophocles' *Œdipus, the King,* has little except poetic power to unite it with *Philoctetes* or even *Ajax.* Greek tragedy is as various in its content as English tragedy. This fact is something many critics find only too easy to forget.

It was the Greek, of all historical peoples, who discovered a virtue in doubt, and a mental exhilaration in exploring the limitations of man's nature and the "antagonism that lies at the heart of the world." It was Sophocles, though he has one Chorus lament:

> Races of mortal man
> Whose life is but a span,
> I count ye but the shadow of a shade!
> For he who most doth know
> Of bliss, hath but the show;
> A moment, and the visions pale and fade: [1]

who in another place proudly exclaims:

> Many wonders there be, but naught more wondrous than man;
> . . . . . .
> He hath provision for all; fell plague he hath learnt to endure;
> Safe what e'er may befall; yet for death he hath found no cure.

It is, nevertheless, this fundamental human paradox, man's aspirations and powers, and his pitiful limitations and death—the thing one sees in Greek thought from Homer to Plutarch—that allowed room for the attitude we define as tragic. It is not his weakness alone, for then his fate, like that of a senseless beast, is only pathetic, if not irrelevant; it is not his strength alone, for then he is either a senseless boaster or a demigod.

Again, tragedy is essentially rebellion against the paradox of

[1] *Œdipus, the King,* F. Storr translation. The passage below is from *Antigone,* same tr.

this human lot, the uprush of man's reason and will against the narrow confines of mortal destiny. Theology and a narrow theological moral code may lay down a philosophy of life as a pattern of obedience and recompense, but daily experience rises and proclaims the whole tissue a lie. Man is not in a congenial world; the gods, the laws of nature, the ways of other men, the whole manner of life, are indifferent to the fate of the best and wisest. Or the evil lurks unsuspected in the very heart of man himself and, suddenly bursting forth like a natural cataclysm, spreads destruction far and wide. How explain the fate of Job, of Antigone, of Œdipus, of Hamlet, of Hector, of the brilliant heroes and well-doers to humanity whose sudden end has something lurid in its malevolence? Is nature hostile, or is it merely indifferent; are the gods just, is the essential human demand for justice only the pitiful cry of impotence? These are the paradoxes that lie at the heart of life. "The failure of the moralist is the triumph of the tragedian."

> Till I die, I will not put away mine integrity from me.
> My righteousness I hold fast, and will not let it go:
> My heart shall not reproach me so long as I live.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> How small a whisper do we hear of Him!
> But the thunder of His power who can understand?

It is this whisper that the tragic poet tries to catch in the crashing thunder as the powers of the world overwhelm man. Out of this catastrophe that is human destiny, tragedy would, if it can, rescue some pattern and significance for human fate. Tragedy is an escape from the ills of life, but an escape not by shutting the doors and closing the ears against the uproar, but by vividly facing human destiny at its worst, challenging its malevolence, and gazing steadily at the heart of the pain in search for a human value. For the tragic possibilities lie within the nature of man himself, and are due to his ability to dare to protest against his destiny. Tragedy is rebellion with a conscious purpose, to rescue from the wreck something that man may yet cling to. Evil is

only human; for there is no evil in nature. Nature itself is orderly, and obedience to nature's law is the way of nature. Only man, who is yet a creation of nature, has that in him which transcends nature's law, for only man has the power, the will, and the reason to assert his revolt.

One would like to quote here Pope's famous lines describing this paradox of human littleness and greatness. Yet there is a spice of cynicism in Pope's attitude that has little in common with tragedy. One would like far more to exclaim with Saint Paul, but in a far different context: "Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?"

> Placed on this Isthmus of a middle state,
> A being darkly wise and rudely great;
> With too much knowledge for the Sceptic side,
> With too much weakness for a Stoic's pride,
> He hangs between; in doubt to act, or rest;
> In doubt to deem himself a God, or Beast;
> In doubt his mind or body to prefer;
> Born but to die, and reas'ning but to err. . .
> Created half to rise, and half to fall;
> Great Lord of all things, yet a Prey to all;
> Sole Judge of Truth; in endless error hurl'd:
> The Glory, Jest, and Riddle of the World!

And the struggle is far from meaningless; at least one of the combatants knows clearly what he wants, though his crash is due to his inability to know how to secure his safety. It is not a contest,

> Where ignorant armies clash by night.

As to the significance of this contest between a rebellious subject and an omnipotent ruler, we have the theories of a myriad of critics and philosophers; from them we may gather hints, here and there, that may help us to see a pattern in the poet's utterance. After that it will be appropriate to put the question to the poets themselves, a representative list of them, from Æschylus to Ibsen.

To the philosopher, Hegel, tragedy is a vindication of cosmic justice. The great moving principles of life, like honor, justice, affection, ambition, duty, are each in its way worthy; and as long as life can keep these motives each to its own track, all is well. But should there occur a conflict between two and neither give way, there will be the fatal collision of tragedy. All this is commonplace enough, in experience. It is the lesson that Hegel draws from it that is significant in his theory. At such moments the eternal cosmic justice asserts its power, and the fate of the tragic character is a triumph over an inconsistency, and his catastrophe a vindication of a universe in which paradoxes can occur only that the eraser may be drawn over them. It is like a vindication of the law of moving bodies seen in a railway head-on collision.

The tragedy then is a triumph of justice in which the tragic figure recognizes the secret of his ailment, is reconciled to his fate, and lifts his eyes above his present misery to the beatific vision of a universe in which contradictions exist only that they may be annihilated. The spectator should not feel pity for the poor victim, for "the man of nobility and greatness has no wish to be smothered with this sort of pity." The fault usually is with the character; he has, wittingly or unwittingly, permitted himself to be brought into a situation, like that of Marc Antony, in whom love and duty conflict, or of Antigone—and this is Hegel's favorite example—who is torn between two perfectly legitimate and honorable motives. She has lost her brother in a battle fought against her own city. He was a public enemy and as such her uncle had ordered that his body be left unburied. But he is her brother, and she tenderly loves him, though not his cause. She can obey authority and disown her brother; she can give her brother his last rites and disown the state. Her tragedy and death are the only possible solution, if there be such a thing as eternal justice. If we insist on pitying a tragic character, it can be only in so far as the character has an ethical claim. Marc Antony, no. Macbeth, certainly not. Hamlet, perhaps. But Antigone is the most pitiable character in all tragic literature.

It is by thus seeing tragedy as a part of the working of the cosmic universe itself, in the way things go in a world where order must prevail, that Hegel succeeded in giving one of the most rationally complete definitions, and yet one that at the same time seems hopelessly out of joint with fact. It is exactly this vision of cosmic justice that one does not achieve in a poem like *Lear* or *Hamlet*. To assert that either the distracted old king or the thought-tormented prince came to recognize the justice of his tragic end, is to lay a hideous burden upon one's credulity. To feel the impossibility of the situation into which each had allowed himself to be drawn is one thing; but to feel that they were somehow testifying to the glory of immutable law—one can't quite bring oneself to it. To them and to the onlooker the outcome seems a malicious and cosmic mockery.

Nor can we find much more help in some more recent adaptations of Hegel's theory, which would attempt to lay the moral responsibility for the victim's fate on his own shoulders and thus find in his fate something of poetic justice. Œdipus sinned when he, though without knowledge, slew his father and wedded his mother. His fate is thus of his own making. Agamemnon alienated his wife's affection by brutally sacrificing his daughter Iphigenia at Aulis; Marc Antony looked too long at the charms of Cleopatra when he should have been thinking of his imperial responsibilities. Rosmer, though he did not recognize it, had allowed the charm of the personality of Rebecca West and the "new thought" to obscure his better judgment—the list can be indefinitely extended,—and the fates of these characters came upon them as the way things go in this world, the moral law of the universe evened up the score by crushing the malefactor. And over his fate the moralist can shake his head, as did Dante on viewing the torments of the damned:

E perchè nostra colpa sì ne scipa? [1]

But granted that these had sinned—and tragedy has worse sinners, Macbeth, Medea, Richard III,—where was the guilt of Anti-

[1] Why does our sin so devastate us?

gone or Othello or Lear? And what shall we say of the lesser characters whose innocent and less vivid destinies are bound up with the larger heroes? The Cordelias, the Ophelias, Mercutio, Charmian and Iras,—these are the pawns in this cosmic game, of whose sacrifice the ethical philosopher can take no cognizance; but where do they come in; did they catch the beatific vision of an all-compelling justice that reconciled them to their fate? To see in tragedy a moral justification of ethical wrongdoing requires a heavy orthodox faith and a definition of wrongdoing that we rarely allow in the ordinary vicissitudes of life. Is there anything commensurate between the pained vacillation of Hamlet and his end; and is vacillation of his sort a "fault"? Is Lear's doting affection to be laid against him as a capital crime? The balance on which these things can be weighed requires a more sensitive eye than that of human reason. Hamlet dies demanding justice and his tale told aright. Perhaps this last is all one can hope of tragedy—to tell the story. But in the very telling of the story the tragedian will find himself driven by his own moral sense to make it intelligible. And even though we love justice, if we rescue intelligibility we have saved somewhat.

Schopenhauer tried the impossible, and almost succeeded. He began with a philosophy of life which was Oriental in its pessimism and desire to escape from life, such as we described a few pages back, and upon it reared his theory of tragedy. He had read deeply in the philosophy of India, and from it had sucked the all-inclusive thought that life is a hopeless multiplication of desires on desire, and that true felicity can come only with the extinction of "the will to live." It is good not to have been born; the next good is to cease to live.

Tragedy, as he conceives it, brings us face to face with this universal truth of human misery. And as failure and death are the fruits of life, tragedy becomes a "eulogist of failure." It is able with its iron pen to write the absurdity of life, the pain of personality, the glory of defeat, the joy of death. Tragedy, to him, in the words of Professor Macneile Dixon, is the "hymn of the fugitive" escaping from the meaninglessness and shock of sheer

existence. It may be due to superlatively wicked characters, to blind fate, or to a hopeless social environment; but whatever its cause, it offers a joyous relief, which, shared by the character and the reader, brings the peculiar and deep pleasure of tragedy. And its theme is always the same—resignation and the quenching of the flames of desire for life.

To be sure, it is a bit difficult to lay one's finger upon a single Greek tragedy, except perhaps the *Œdipus at Colonos* or the *Ajax* of Sophocles, in which this pessimistic disillusionment plays a leading rôle. Macbeth also laid on like a man, though he confessed that the "wine of life was drawn." And the rest of Shakespeare's heroes did not put on immortality with quite the right Oriental grace. Yet there is something in this theory that merits more than a casual glance. Certainly, if we include the tragedies in late fiction, we can make a case for Schopenhauer. At best the value of his theory is that it takes us away from the orthodox effort to see in tragedy only a "moral" formula. But I think our instinctive reaction is also our last judgment—we take tragedy as we take life, with a zest that has in it none of the world-weary resignation of the supposedly patient Oriental. Pessimism is a heady draught and has its peculiar variety of ecstatic compensation, like opium; and a dash of it in philosophy or art has a certain exotic aromatic charm, not to be denied; but one must have a "will to live" to write even a textbook on self-annihilation, or a tragedy. To be consistent, one should go about things in a different way.

And the *Œdipus at Colonos* and the *Ajax,* if we look at them carefully, are not pleas by devourers of their hearts for final surrender. The first is the death of a long-suffering man who had come to know human worth and human affection in the very teeth of affliction, and is now old in years and at his journey's end. He resists intrigue and resents and cries out against violence—has he not known this even at his own hands?—and peacefully he accepts the accolade, resigned at leaving the world, but by no means despising that which he leaves. His wisdom is of another sort. And Ajax dies, the victim of his own passions, he the fore-

most warrior of the Greeks—after the dead Achilles—now after his mad raid the butt of every soldier jest; his death is not the extinction of desires but the great overmastering desire to escape ridicule. He is not reconciled to death, but he cannot reconcile himself to life as he has muddled it by his insanity. He no longer belongs, and he makes the final gesture of self-assertion. The same is true of Brutus in *Julius Cæsar;* in the last act, "that noble vessel full of grief" finds more glory in the losing day than even his conqueror; "night hangs upon his eyes," but it brings no surrender to his heart. No, there is no pessimism at the heart of the world of Sophocles or Shakespeare. Their tragic heroes are never so fully themselves as at the supreme moment of their lives.

But things are somewhat different in some of our later tragedies. Let me instance several—Ibsen's *Ghosts,* Hauptmann's *Weavers,* O'Neill's *Hairy Ape,* and Toller's *Machine Wreckers.* Mrs. Alving is the tragic figure of the first, not the diseased son in whom the ghost of the father rises to rebuke the mother's mistake. The theme of the play is not as it has usually been made to read, "the fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge"; but it is the mother's pious lie, first when she refused to violate the conventional morality and leave her husband, and second—and worse—when she shielded her son and even herself by building up an utterly false tradition to her husband's memory. When finally the whole world she has so carefully preserved comes crashing down like a house of cards, she is bewildered and stunned; she does surrender. Her life is now as empty as last winter's grate, but ——

Similarly, the hopelessness of the peasant weavers' lot, in spite of attempted rebellion, is, at the close of the *Weavers,* a cheerless one of abject surrender. There is not a ray of light across the drab landscape. And O'Neill's *Hairy Ape,* in looking to find himself in the cage with his simian brother, is at last only crushed to death, and dies with a final sigh of relief. But somehow here again, though we have all the pessimism of Schopenhauer, we fail utterly to catch the compensation of a joy in the final revelation of true cosmic values, as Schopenhauer would have them.

If the tragedy is disillusionment and surrender, it brings no insight into the meaning of existence. The personality dwindles, but the shadow that finally engulfs it is the blackness of eternal emptiness. To such characters the denial of personality brings no rest, but an eternity of weariness. And it is this weariness at the heart of the world that in Toller's play is the voice as of a wind across bleak, unmeasured spaces. This is not the pessimism that arms life with a dagger, but an indifference that paralyzes the hand that would clutch it. Life is not worth leaving.

I am not quite sure that anyone can clearly set forth the idea of tragedy as Nietzsche has defined it in his *Birth of Tragedy*. It has too much of poetic rhapsody to be clear philosophy, and too much of philosophy to be pure poetry. And so it is with most of Nietzsche's writings; he is both philosophical poet and poetic philosopher, and never quite convincing as either. But his *Birth of Tragedy* is at least exceedingly interesting reading.

Nietzsche is by temperament and later by conviction a pessimist, but it is a poetic pessimism—by that I mean that his pessimism was with him an anodyne as well as an ecstasy. The heart of all existence is pain; and its secret, death. Music of all of the arts expresses this *Weltschmertz,* this intoxication of lament that at times wells up in us from the secret springs of life. Art, on the other hand—the plastic arts and poetry—is the invention of the human mind to escape from the pain of reality. How hopelessly misleading Nietzsche is in his definition of art, I hope we have by this time seen. Tragedy, however, Greek tragedy in particular, is the union of the two great impulses of life, the ecstasy of pain and the orderliness of art. For in it we see the bliss of annihilation, of "the dissolution of the individual and his unification with primordial existence." Yet at the same time in its art it gives us representations of the pain of life with which man may live. Thus, for the pain of life tragedy gives us an anodyne that makes life endurable. We watch the spectacle of a tormented Œdipus, a murdered Agamemnon, a self-immolated Antigone, and from the sheer intoxication of joy at the vicarious suffering

draw an assuagement of our own load of grief. Thus tragedy brings to the audience the balm of its "magic healing."

There is no moral in true tragedy, to this philosopher, except the escape from pain. It was Socrates and, later, Euripides who insisted on measuring life with their ethical norm, and who by prying into human motives for revelations of character and psychology, shipwrecked tragedy and made "the death leap into the bourgeois drama." Tragedy has nothing in common with optimism or common sense or any theories of divine or human justice or retribution. It is based alone on the eternal paradox of life itself, and the greater its paradox the greater its power and value. And thus Nietzsche brings us back to the original question asked at the beginning of this chapter. Is the pleasure of tragedy only a perverted love of pain, of self-inflicted pain? No, not quite, Nietzsche would answer, for this pain is but the necessary step for the greatest and most intoxicating of joys—the joy of reconciliation with Primordial Being, the totality of existence of which all individuals are but sad and temporary manifestations.

> We are to recognize that all that comes into being must be ready for a sorrowful end; we are forced to look into the terrors of the individual existence—yet we are not to become rigid with fear: a metaphysical comfort tears us momentarily from the bustle of the transforming figures. We are really for a brief moment Primordial Being itself, feeling its raging desire for existence and joy in existence; the struggle, the pain, the destruction of phenomena, now appear to us as a necessary thing, in view of the surplus of countless forms of existence which force and push one another into life, in view of the exuberant fertility of the universal will. We are pierced by the maddening sting of these pains just when we have become, as it were, one with the infinite primordial joy in existence, and when we anticipate, in Dionysian ecstasy, the indestructibility and eternity of this joy. In spite of fear and pity, we are the happy living beings, not as individuals, but as the *one* living being, with whose creative joy we are united.[1]

I must confess that this obvious transcendentalism leaves me cold. Nor are we ready to assert that the Greek dramatists, even

[1] Fadiman tr.

Æschylus, were interested in what Nietzsche would have them. It is difficult to think of the agony of Prometheus, Agamemnon, Œdipus, as a denial of their personalities and a joyous leap into the ecstasy of Primordial Being. I imagine that Sophocles would have some difficulty in comforting even the aged Œdipus at Colonos by the Nietzschean theory of compensation for the evils of personality and existence. For I suspect that the one thing his tragic characters prized, and in which they even sought compensation, was precisely this secret of personality—but of this, later.

It is interesting to read these varied efforts to philosophize the tragic experience. To attempt to find an abstract formula for tragedy is not a little like trying to find one for life itself. It is all a part of the effort we investigated in another connection to reduce an unique experience to a creed.[1] The poet finds one of supreme significance to himself and to others; the philosopher attempts to translate this into universal terms and to give it a scope the poet never dreamed of. And yet these creeds also have their value. They represent certain more or less inadequate or incomplete ways of looking at tragedy. They will help—if we do not allow ourselves to be too much persuaded of their finality.

This tour of metaphysical speculation brings us with relief to Aristotle. All tragic roads lead to this master of those who know. His definition is as dry as Nietzsche's is perfervid; but as F. L. Lucas remarks, there are times when "it is better to be dry than to be rotten." "A tragedy is the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in language with pleasurable accessories, each kind brought in separately in the parts of the work; in a dramatic, not in a narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and terror, wherewith to accomplish its katharsis of such emotions."[2] Of this I would call attention first to the significance of the word "serious," and then to the last phrase, "with incidents arousing pity and terror, wherewith to accomplish its katharsis of such emotions"; which

[1] See Chapter IX.
[2] Bywater trans., slightly modified.

phrase has caused nearly as much trouble as the Articles of the Nicene Creed. Of it a witty Frenchman, the Abbé Batteux, once remarked: "This decision is justly regarded as an oracle, because to the authority of him who pronounces it, it joins an obscurity of meaning and a lucidity of phrase." In truth it is hard to find another short collocation of words which has permitted such wide and often irrelevant difference of opinion.

But what is of significance here is first that Aristotle gives us the theme of tragedy: it must be serious—that is, of serious significance to humanity. And then he attempts, with the inadequate knowledge at his disposal, to describe the process and conclusion of the tragic experience. More than half of his *Poetics* is an elaboration of what he means by serious—the variety of character most appropriate, the place of the plot, the necessity of the tragic conflict, the fatal flaw in the character that makes the outcome inevitable; all this and much more, that any careful reading of his notes will disclose, is involved in the term translated here as serious. Then, by as brilliant a piece of scientific anticipation as the history of criticism affords, he lays his finger upon a fairly adequate description of the mental experience of tragedy—a reconciliation of the opposed and powerful impulses of pity and terror.[1]

But before we discuss this definition further, there is one necessary reservation to be made. It is the common opinion—for example, that of Nietzsche—that in experiencing a drama or story one identifies oneself for the moment with the hero, and suffers and exults with him. I believe, at least in most cases, that this is only rarely true, and that, especially in a tragedy, one sits, as it were, at the center of the experience, taking in all, and yet in a way superior to all. One is not by turns Hamlet, Horatio, Ophelia, Polonius, Laertes; but the experiences of all in their relative significance and intensity are fused into a complex and relevant pattern. Though we may or may not take sides—note the curious absence of such prejudice in *The Merchant of Venice* or *Macbeth*

[1] See I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism,* Chapter XXXII, where a reference is made to this subject.

—yet each detail of the experience, from whichever character it comes, fits into the pattern of a fuller experience than one possible for any of the characters. It was this peculiar sympathetic aloofness of the community from the action, that the chorus, as we tried to say earlier, came to symbolize.

It is this sympathetic aloofness that lends its full poignancy to the opposed impulses of pity and terror, and to any other of the potent impulses roused by the serious theme of tragedy. And, as we have seen, it is precisely in the utterly paradoxical nature of these deep impulses that much of the value of the tragic experience consists. Pity—we catch the full significance of this profound going-out of the spirit in response to unmerited suffering in the futile attitude of bewildered grief in the Greek choruses:

> A heart of iron and fashioned out of rock,
> Prometheus, is he who feels no compassion at thy miseries.

Futile, because between it and the hero is a chasm no human aid can bridge; bewildered, because the suffering is so intense and the situation so extraordinary that human experience can offer no parallel. Terror is a more complicated impulse. It is certainly not roused at the spectacle of the hero's wrongdoing, as smug criticism has so often asserted. It is not the thought of the enormity of Macbeth's crime against Duncan that stirs our souls with dread at his taking off. It is rather that fear of the awful unknown and yet inevitable, like the sense of a lurking enemy in the dark ready and eager to spring and only waiting a chance.

> Like one that on a lonely road
> Doth walk in fear and dread;
> And having once turned round walks on,
> And turns no more his head,
> Because he knows a frightful fiend
> Doth close behind him tread.

These are among the most potent of the impulses in tragedy, and in a way the hall-mark of great tragedy. A goodly half of the

Greek tragedies know them in their richness, as do most of Shakespeare's. But they tend to soften as tragedy is adulterated and made easier. Pity gives way to the pathetic, and terror to dread or something even less difficult to bear—*"douce terreur,"* as Boileau so aptly phrased it, and *"pitié charmante"*—and we have the sweetness of Racine, not the tragedy that Sophocles and Shakespeare knew.

There is in reality nothing mystical or extraordinary about the "katharsis." The definitions that have been given to this Greek word have been numerous enough to fill a volume. The commonest today is that it is a medical term; and the katharsis of the emotions of pity and terror through pity and terror, is a kind of therapeutic relief—a mental treatment, as it were—for those who find themselves at times suffering from emotional indigestion. Or to change the figure, we are to think of people somewhat as emotional Leyden jars which periodically need to be discharged, and this is done by an exhibition of pity and terror on the stage. Why people should be purged of pity it is hard, at least now, to conceive. Even Bacon, who had none too much in his make-up, could write: "The nobler a soul is, the more objects of compassion it hath." One would think that the tragedies should serve quite the contrary function—awaken pity, not wash one clean of it.

There is, of course, the analogy of the suppressed lives on the American frontier, especially of the women; and the fearful havoc wrought by hysteria and insanity in people like these who had no normal outlet for their emotions. The huge success of the evangelistic revivals among them and the hysteria engendered might, if we care to push the point, seem to indicate that Aristotle was regarding tragedy as an emotional outlet like that the Methodist camp meetings once offered. But somehow the whole tenor of Aristotle's thought here and elsewhere seems to point in a contrary direction. Frankly, I cannot see tragedy as a kind of social therapeutics for people who without it might have disturbed the night life of Athens. The Greeks were not Puritans, and there were opportunities without number in those pagan days for the free expression of emotional life.

It seems much more logical to take the meaning of the passage to be simply a summary of what we know takes place in an experience of this kind. The paradoxical impulses are roused by the spectacle; and as the experience is brought to a conclusion, the impulses are reconciled and stilled in the calm of the achieved attitude. There remains of them none of their emotional agitation; their devastating force is spent; and the mind of the spectator is at rest. This is the katharsis. Shelley a century ago and more had the same notion, when he asserted that the highest poetry "married exultation and horror, grief and pleasure, eternity and change; it subdues to union under its light yoke all irreconcilable things." Milton at the conclusion of the *Samson* finds the same rest after labor:

> And calm of mind, all passion spent.

Is it not because there is no "calm of mind" or spending of passion at the conclusion of the first half of Sophocles' *Ajax,* when the poor victim of his own passion commits suicide, that the poet felt compelled to proceed to Part II and the scene of the hero's burial? [1] Ajax has died and left behind a "wounded name" that allows no rest to the impulse of pity. It is here that his half-brother Teucer appears—a practice quite contrary to Greek dramatic usage, to introduce a major character so late in the play—and vindicates his kinsman's memory to the still vengeful enemy. It is only then that all can join with a feeling of appropriateness in the closing words:

> Since time began,
> There lived on earth no nobler man.

There is something refreshingly obvious about Aristotle; and yet he is like his definition, curiously compelling. The theme must be serious, it must be inevitable,[2] and hence there must be something in the character that shall provide the clue to this inevitability—the tragic fault or tragic flaw. *"Homo sum, nihil*

[1] There is the same lack of a katharsis at the end of Act III in Julius Cæsar, and in the remaining two acts Shakespeare is doing for Brutus precisely what Sophocles did for Ajax.

[2] I am by this word paraphrasing his use of the terms "probable" and "necessary."

humani a me alienum puto," can be said by any character in tragedy—"I am a man with the weaknesses common to mankind,"—and it is one of these flaws, some error at some critical moment, that pulls the trigger that closes the trap. It is in this insistence that the cause of the tragedy be intelligible that the peculiar character of the Greek displays itself. For it was he who first struggled with the idea of Fate and tried to read an intelligible pattern into the mystery of human destiny. And the greatness of Greek tragedy, like that of Greek art, is that it strives to tear aside the veil and break the seals that would hide from man the secret ways of nature.

According to the old and sacred legends—we must not forget that they were part of the paraphernalia of religion—Œdipus had been fated from his birth to be the man of the unnameable sin, and by his crime to involve his whole family; Agamemnon was of a family stricken with a bloody curse; Prometheus, though a god, was for his benevolence doomed to be fettered remorselessly to the crags of the Caucasus; Phædra through the agency of a jealous goddess was to be inspired with a criminal passion for her stepson Hippolytus. An Indian poet like Valmiki would introduce supernatural devices, as he does in the story of Rama and Sita, and give the story wonder but little human intelligibility. But the Greek worked with a surer hand. It is Œdipus' over-confident rashness, and nothing supernatural, that first leads him to his monstrous sin and then lifts the veil from his eyes to disclose the innocent enormity of his offense. It is the same inherited rashness that involves in ruin his admirable sons. Antigone in this same rash despair at an impossible dilemma takes her own life. Agamemnon forfeited the love of his wife by an act of blood, and to supply additional fuel to her resentment, brings to his palace the captive princess, Cassandra. Prometheus, old and tried in craft, set at naught the command of a young monarch, Zeus, who yet felt none too secure on his throne. It may have been an unjust edict, that humanity was not to be lifted from its brutishness; but defiance even of injustice will merit a check. And we must not forget that later, in the play now lost, Zeus

and Prometheus are to be reconciled—a symbolic reconciliation of power and benevolence. Phædra was young and temperamental—her mother had been a woman of lawless passion—Theseus, her husband, now middle-aged and a hopeless globe-trotter, had no business to leave her at home alone with his son of her own age. It needed no jealous goddess; and Hippolytus, though a misogynist, was handsome. In each case the poet has put into the character of the hero or heroine, or has discovered in it, exactly the human factor that will make the solution of the tragic situation intelligible.

It is worthy of remark that here, as in Shakespeare, the tragic flaw is in reality often the very finest trait in the hero's greatness.[1] It was Œdipus' confident rashness that made him king and the idol of Thebes. It was Antigone's willful affection that was her undoing. Until the crisis her sister Ismene was more subdued; but when she saw her sister arraigned she promptly sprang unasked to her side; but Ismene is no tragic figure. Agamemnon's pathetic zeal to serve the sacred cause against Troy, a war in which thousands were to fall, led him to make a personal sacrifice of his daughter for the common good. What was the life of one girl, when all Greece demanded the victim, and he was leader of Greece? It was, in its way, a noble act. Prometheus rashly lending an arm to abject humanity was showing only the sweetest of benevolence. And it is Phædra who has given the cue to the thousand and one tragedies of which love has been the motive, until now there is little room left for any other.

Later tragedy from Shakespeare to Ibsen had the same theme—to discover intelligibility in human suffering; and to catch the hint in some act of the chief character, in some distortion often of his chief virtue. The finest thing in Rosmer is his openness to new and liberal ideas—to be sure, they were personified in the play by Rebecca West, and there seemed nothing sinister in the frank friendship between these two vital beings; but Beata—poor, ill Beata—had eyes that probed deep, and she committed suicide. Suddenly we forget that the play began as a conflict between

[1] See A. C. Bradley, *Lectures on Shakespeare.*

conservative and liberal ideas, and we have the eternal conflict of personalities, as it always is in life, where ideas become persons and lose all abstraction. Rosmer has his eyes opened; like the Euripidean Admetus in the *Alcestis,* he discovers that he is the murderer of his wife. It was not against ideas that he was fighting, but against poor, helpless Beata, who in an ecstasy of self-sacrifice effaced herself. The play of *Alcestis* ends happily, for here there are no large conflicts involved, but *Rosmersholm* cannot; the disturbance has been too great. There is always débris after a storm. The tragedy of *Rosmersholm* is all due to the sudden awakening of Rosmer to a fresh liberalism; but to put away his past he must crush his wife, and this he cannot do without crushing also himself. This is the seriousness of tragedy, and its intelligibility.

Though fantastic in its poetic symbolisms, and as far from the realism of much modern drama as the fairy lore of Germany is from the Krupp works at Essen, Hauptmann's *Sunken Bell* has a tragic theme and a tragic manner that belongs to the tradition. Heinrich, the bell-maker, though fixed in a petty village, has aspirations for a life of creative beauty. But his neighbors and family belong to the village and have its limited horizon. And though for a moment he may tear himself away and dwell on the mount of his imagination with Rotendelein, his inspiration, the claims of the past and the present are too strong. It is thus, as in Ibsen and Hauptmann, that modern tragedy plays with ideas through the vital play of personality on personality, making ideas take form in personality.

Shakespeare is less directly concerned with ideas, and rather more with the larger aspects of human life; and it is this fact that gives him his larger value. Ibsen, Hauptmann, and the moderns like Galsworthy or O'Neill, are dated, as it were, by their preoccupations. Shakespeare too is dated, but like a geological epoch. It is curious, too, how he rises above the narrower limits of his own age. *Hamlet* was a good story for the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the practice of the blood-feud was yet far from forgotten. Corneille uses it again in the *Cid;* yet

because for us today this motive seems so distant few moderns can fully appreciate the delicacy of Chimène. Hamlet's chief motive was to have been his desire for revenge. But it is most extraordinary how Shakespeare is constantly allowing us to forget this and fastening his glance upon other aspects of his hero's personality, aspects which have a far deeper and richer significance.

Hamlet, gifted and raised in the seclusion of the university and touching the court only superficially, as the poet, scholar, gentleman, suddenly discovers wickedness, a rottenness at the heart of things and in people whom he had ever loved, like his mother, most passionately. His uncle he had never trusted, but the dislike here was the unreasoning contempt of instinct. His father's death had rudely awakened him from the scholar's and poet's dream. His uncle's theft of the kingdom had taught him more of the ways of men. His mother's sudden marriage had been a shock from which the only escape possible seemed to be to rush away again to the seclusion of the university and its quiet orderly life. Then came the horrid revelation of murder and adultery. Hamlet is not insane, nor near insane. But his whole personality has been transformed by these swift visions of the essential wickedness of the world, of the greed, cruelty, filth that lie at the heart of things. He is utterly disillusioned, and disillusionment means a complete denial of all accepted values. Immediately his attitude toward everything changes. The crown is not worth striving for in a world where all are villains. His old associates have become traitors and sycophants. Woman has become a commodity for barter and sale, and revenge a thing hardly worth the price even when easy opportunity is offered. It is this Hamlet against the soldier Hamlet, the son of his father, that gives us the theme of the play. Hamlet can't be a reformer, for to believe in one's reforms one must retain some belief in essential values. And even death, as he has seen, can offer no release.

Every tragedy is in a way, then, a contest between utterly unequal forces, and a story of a defeat or of a victory that brings no light gladness. The contest may be an external one like that between Prometheus and Zeus in Æschylus' great play, or in his

Agamemnon. Or as in a modern tragedy, Masefield's *Tragedy of Nan,* between a richly endowed girl and her meager and selfish foster parents. Or as in Hauptmann's *Weavers,* between the poor peasant weavers and the forces of greed in a new capitalism. Or as in O'Neill's *Hairy Ape,* between a single misplaced individual and the way things go in the world. Or between hereditary enemies, as in *Romeo and Juliet,* into whose quarrel two lovers are suddenly tossed; and the tragedy is their efforts to achieve the impossible. It is always impossible, this conflict—the forces engaged are too pitifully unequal. Yet ever the impulse of terror is counterpoised by the glimmer of hope, even until the end; else humanity would renounce its most cherished heritage, the last gift of Pandora, the mirage of hope.[1]

Again, and more frequently and more potently, the conflict may be an inner one; or both inner and outer, as in *Lear* and *Hamlet* and *Œdipus the King.* In each of these the tragedy begins by an external antagonism; Lear with his daughters, Hamlet with the injunction of revenge, Œdipus with the command of the oracle to discover the murderer. But as the play proceeds, the inner conflict becomes the more significant, until as we watch the agony of Lear fighting against himself for his sanity, we forget all but the suffering:

> When the mind's free
> The body's delicate; the tempest in my mind
> Doth from my senses take all feeling else
> Save what beats there. . . .
> . . . O Regan, Goneril!
> Your old kind father, whose frank heart gave all,—
> O, that way madness lies; let me shun that.

Much has been made in recent years of the tragic internal conflicts between the conscious self and the forces released from the sub-conscious, suddenly rising and spreading ruin in their path, as in Maeterlinck's *Pelléas et Mélisande,* Przybyszewski's *Snow,* O'Neill's *Emperor Jones.* But before Freud and Jung had

[1] There is a happy sentence in Aristotle's *Rhetoric:* "If (persons) are to feel the anguish of uncertainty, there must be some faint expectation of escape."

invented the terminology there were plays of Euripides which portrayed with care this division of the human soul into two armed camps, and the utter desolation done to orderly lives by inexplicable passion. The burst of sudden passion in poor Hercules, after the fatigue of a sojourn in Hades and the discovery of the treachery of Lycus, and the terrible slaughter of his own wife and children—your psycho-analyst can explain the violence without difficulty. The agony of Hecuba and Andromache in the *Daughters of Troy,* now slaves to the victorious Greeks, forced to make the final sacrifice of daughter and son. It is not the Greek enemy that we feel in the tragedy, but the sudden surge of passion in these castaway princesses, an explosion of pent-up forces unknown even to themselves who felt they had already endured the last agony. It is not to be wondered at that Euripides, who could thus explore and chart the inexorable devastation of mental conflict, should have become and should continue to be the most potent ancient influence upon modern tragedy.

The greatness, again, of the Greeks is seen in the manner in which this conflict can have but an inevitable termination. The causes of the struggle will vary from age to age, following the peculiar interests of the time. Today we are again nearer to Euripides, as was seventeenth-century France, perhaps because this is not an age of great and heroic deeds. The age of Shakespeare and that of Goethe found its motives differently, as did again the ages of Sophocles and Æschylus. But whatever its motive, the end is always inevitable, or it is not convincing. Though in some of his plays Shakespeare makes accident take the cue from the character, as in *Hamlet,* it is always an accident whose "nature is subdued to what it works in, like the dyer's hand."

It is not physical suffering that is the great revelation of tragedy. This may be poignant and thrill the spectator almost beyond power of endurance, as in Hauptmann's *Weavers;* but this result is not great tragedy. The lament of Prometheus on the crags is not for the pains of his fetters or the discomfort of heat and frost; Lear's body was not "delicate" to the terror of the tempest. In

this fact we find the answer to the age-old theory that the love of tragedy is a survival of the old blood lust, and a satisfaction due to the sight of vicarious suffering. Whatever may be true of some, and whatever may once have been true of all—it is not in mere pain and suffering that the secret of the charm of tragedy can be discovered.

The suffering, to be greatly tragic, must involve more than the peripheral nerves of the body; it must go deeper and touch the springs of life. It is a desolation, like Macbeth's:

> The wine of life is drawn, and the mere lees
> Is left this vault to brag of.

Hamlet's exclamation, "but thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my heart," is more than pain, it is the utter bewilderment of one upon whom all gates have suddenly been closed and to whom life exhibits only its stark illogical horrors. No, physical suffering alone cannot make tragedy—for life must also show the sudden collapse of all moral values and all reasonableness, and in their place put on the insane mask of unreason and pitiless injustice. These things pain, but there is also bewilderment, resentment, and disgust. Because of a lack of this moral eclipse, the realistic tragedies of some of our latest drama and fiction do not fully satisfy, for the conflict has been lowered to the point where it is the beast in man crushing and laying desolate all his "infinite faculty." They give us, not Œdipus appalled at the magnitude of his crime, and blinding his eyes that he may never behold the clean sun and the face of nature; nor Hamlet, to whom death comes as a release, his only regret being his "wounded name"; nor Othello, "ensnared body and soul" and "perplexed in the extreme"; but in their place a lesser conflict and a more nearly physical grief. It is always easy, in the place of genuine desolation to give us the pepper, vinegar, and asafœtida of hysteria and theatricalism, and for strong self-restraint, a hard sentimental emotionalism. There are more than traces of this in O'Neill; we never get away from it in D'Annunzio.

It is the nemesis of naturalism. As Shelley said a hundred years ago, "the highest poetry teaches self-knowledge and self-respect." It does this by revealing us ourselves in the moments of highest mental agitation and deepest anguish. And at these moments man is not swayed by only a partial or special grief.

There is one test, not too difficult, to make. Can the tragedy bear the contrary impulse of irony? Shakespeare is never so successful as when he introduces into his tragedies the scenes of comic buffoonery—the drunken porter in *Macbeth,* the grave-digger, and the comic badinage with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and Osric in *Hamlet,* the irrelevant chatter of the countryman about his asps in *Antony and Cleopatra.* We have read of these as scenes of comic relief, by means of which the strained attention is for a moment allowed to relax, that the mind may be prepared for the poignancy of the next scene. And comedy in tragedy has been justified on the parallel with life itself; but a more careful reading of Shakespeare will tell us otherwise.

These scenes of "comic relief" are always at points where the tragic expectation is the tensest, and they give us, not a moment of respite, but quite the opposite. The porter ushering the guilty on "the primrose path" to hell in his drunken fancy is the ironic comment on Macbeth who is literally passing the gates, and has just exclaimed:

> One cried "God bless us!" and "Amen" the other;
> As they had seen me with these hangman's hands.
> Listening their fear, I could not say "Amen,"
> When they did say "God bless us."

The grave-digger scene with its trifling about death and graves, and "to what base uses we may return," comes just before the last great scene and is its ironic comment. The very triviality of the dialogue is its greatest potency.

The Greeks used irony in a different manner, but with the same result. Œdipus curses the murder of Laïos, and to uncover him takes the very steps that will convict himself. Every move

enmeshes him yet more firmly; and the audience all the while is perfectly aware that the final recognition of his own ironical efforts will spell tragedy. Shakespeare uses the same method in *Macbeth* in the irony of the prophecy of the Weird Sisters, and again in *Othello* in the device by which not only is the Moor convinced of Desdemona's guilt, but she becomes also the author of her own fate. This is ironical retribution with a vengeance.

But lesser tragedy cannot bear irony nor, above all, its presence in the form of comedy. It is for this reason that the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century classicists "discovered" that the mixture of tragedy and comedy was not in the rules; for the variety of tragedy then in vogue, as Racine's, with its heavy pathos but its light terror, could not endure the sharp paradox of grim laughter. Nor could the tragedies of Corneille, with their note of "admiration" of the heroic, a kind of swashbuckling nobility and stoic reticence, endure the harshness of the contrast. And Racine's heroines—for he has few heroes—are too passive in their rôles—the tragedy comes to them—to be the ironical authors of their own fates; Corneille's heroes, on the other hand, are too intelligent.

"Self-knowledge" and "self-respect" (I take these words from Shelley) are the revelation of great poetry, and above all of tragedy, the greatest of poetry. These are things not discernible in the responses to the minor and conventional problems of living, but only in the moments of crisis when man's whole personality is engaged, when the odds of the conflict call out all the latent undiscovered powers of humanity, even the power to suffer. Tragedy to the Greeks and to us also, though in our later works often in a far lesser degree, "means an exultation—an urge toward life, and ever more life. . . . When they saw a tragedy on the stage they felt their own hopeless hopes ennobled in Art." True—and this is the final answer to Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, as well as to many of our own time who use tragedy as a means of displaying man's ignoble weakness and irrelevant despair.[1]

[1] A recent critic, Scott-James, has somewhat the same thing to say: "Tragedy resolves pain in the energy of human action."

Pass out of the realm of the commonplace and approach life with a seriousness, and invariably an approach is made to tragedy. For in the commonplace alone and in obedience is there safety. To revolt against obedience, to pass beyond the circle of routine, is to invite a conflict with the unknown forces of society, of the universe, or of one's own undiscovered personality; and this is tragedy. It is this that is the theme of the tragedy of *Faust* as well as the *Tragedy of Nan*. Only *Faust* is the far greater of the two because the forces engaged are more significant. *Hamlet* is greater than *Emperor Jones*[1] for the same reason, though both are tragedies of bewildered men. *Lear* is greater than *Père Goriot*. For the same reason, Shakespeare is greater than Racine in the larger vision he grants of the secret of a complete personality. Racine's characters, at their best in *Britannicus* or *Athalie*, never quite rise out of the pattern of the situations in which they are engaged to fill the horizon, as do Macbeth or even Richard the Third. For the measure of the greatness of a tragedy is the wealth of the personality displayed in the struggle. Personality is the recompense for suffering, and its varied manifestation is the secret of the exultation one experiences as one watches the agony of Lear or the bewilderment of Hamlet or Œdipus. "What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his soul?" was a question once asked by a man who was to know tragedy intimately. To lose the world but to gain one's soul, this is the profit of tragedy, as both history and art bear abundant witness. And the greater the victory, the greater the tragedy. For tragedy is life that plucks victory from the very jaws of defeat.

There is no moral or cause of poetic justice that tragedy serves. The cry of Job, as the cry of Hamlet or Lear, is the cry that from the earliest dawn of humanity, when in imagination man pushed his gaze beyond the *flammantia mœnia mundi*, beyond the hori-

[1] O'Neill's tragic characters, with few exceptions, are damaged rather than released by the tragic experience. They are not purified but flawed, like poor metal; the tragic experience discloses their essential baseness. The same is true of the bitter tragedies of Strindberg, *The Father* and *Miss Julia*. *Gustavus Vasa* is far better.

zon of the stars, has marked man's struggle with an inhospitable and unjust universe. It is a hopeless cry and ever shall be; but in it, too, is the hope and the value of the human soul. For though it may never see its dream of a world made after man's desires, yet it reveals also a man made more perfect and more intelligible through human suffering.[1]

[1] Something should have been said about the neo-classical rule of the unities, if only for historical reasons, for the subject now is as vain as last year's hopes. In any case, the unity of place and of time meant little to a genius like Corneille or Racine. To the former they meant only an empty adherence, for in reality his plays have a time and a place all their own and quite inconsistent with any clock or measure of space a physicist might devise. To Racine they were needless, for his plays concerned only the crisis of an action whose antecedents were cunningly introduced in the exposition, and whose whole duration was necessarily brief, as is the manner of a well-behaved crisis. In this last he was like the Greeks at their best. Shakespeare and, like him, the moderns are interested also in the developments that lead to the crisis, and hence required the larger frame.

Or, to put it in other words, the Greeks, and in a measure also Racine, were interested in the episode and to exploit its significance in dialogue. Hence they arrested the action in significant scenes which, like those on the frieze of the Parthenon, they set out before us in fixed dramatic poses. The modern method is to restore the flux of life and its flowing dramatic action. To be specific, the play of *Macbeth* could easily furnish Æschylus with a handful of separate plots.

Chapter XIII

COMEDY

WIDE RANGE OF COMEDY—COMEDY AND TRAGEDY—COMEDY AND THE DRAMA—COMEDY AND LAUGHTER—MEANING OF LAUGHTER—LAUGHTER A RELIEF—VARIETIES OF LAUGHTER—THE INCONGRUOUS—HUMOR—JOY—RELATIVITY OF LAUGHTER—SATIRE AND COMEDY—THE GROTESQUE AND COMEDY—INTRIGUE—ROMANTIC COMEDY—INDIAN COMEDY—GROTESQUENESS IN CHARACTER—MOLIÈRE—STUDIES IN COMIC PERSONALITY—THEORY OF BERGSON—THE GENERALIZING POWER OF COMEDY—WIT—SOCIAL REQUIREMENTS FOR COMEDY—VALUE OF COMEDY—THE IDEA IN COMEDY—SHAKESPEARE—ITS MORAL VALUE—A SOCIAL RELIEF.

THERE is no "touch of nature" so pervasive, or so welcome, as the spirit of comedy, or so varied. Age cannot wither it nor custom stale. As Montaigne said of Aristotle, it "hath an oar in every water, and meddleth with all things." It is found in every land, in the highest places as well as the lowest, in the Bible [1] and in the comic strip of this evening's newspaper. It is an attitude, or a series of more or less closely allied attitudes; but, because of its very richness in variety, difficult to define.

There is the broad comic satire in Aristophanes' *Knights*. Cleon, the demagogue, and the Sausage-seller, his rival, are quarreling for the favor of the people, here personified in the old countryman Demos. It is the first charge of graft pilloried in literature. And the sheer buffoonery in Aristophanes! Take, for example, his *Frogs*. Dionysos, the god of Tragedy and Comedy, and his slave, Xanthias, are on their way to the lower world to visit the poet Euripides. Dionysos, a pot-bellied and dwarfish god, has taken the lion skin and the club of Hercules as a disguise. There

[1] See the Story of Samson, Judges, xiii-xvii.

is a dignity about Hades, or should be, but none in this play. Against such broad farce put a piece of verbal pyrotechnics, as in Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew.* Changes on this kind of thing are rung indefinitely in such grotesqueries as Dame Quickley's slaughter of all rules of speech, or Mrs. Malaprop's "derangements of epitaphs," or Lady Teazle's comic seriousness in her answer to Joseph that it meant "parting with her virtue to gain her reputation." There is, on the other hand, the comedy of action when it is the ludicrousness of the situation that rouses our interest, as in Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer,* or its French ancestor, Marivaux's *Jeu de l'Amour et du Hazard,* or Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors,* or Plautus' *Captives*—the list is long. Or there is a character whose grotesque lack of common sense or balance is made the source of interest, as in Molière's *L'Avare* or *Tartuffe,* or Plautus' *Aulularia (Pot of Gold).* Or it is some romantic story of difficulties overcome and worthiness rewarded—usually in love, to point the moral that "the course of true love never did run smooth," like Shakespeare's *As You Like It,* or *Midsummer Night's Dream,* or Lessing's *Minna von Barnhelm.* Or it may be a piece of burlesque, at first glance a piece of magnificent fooling, that later seems to present us with an idea far from trifling, such a thing, for example, as Shaw's *Androcles and the Lion* or *Arms and the Man,* or Barrie's *Admirable Crichton.* And these are by no means all or nearly all of the facets that comedy exposes. It is difficult to find a definition of a thing that can be serious and farcical, romantic and cynical, bitter and sweet, satirical and tender. But of such stuff is comedy.

Serious and farcical, these are paradoxical terms; and yet Horace Walpole once wrote: "Life is a comedy to the man who thinks, and a tragedy to the man who feels." Take this little story from the Sanscrit *Panchatantra:*

There was once an aged merchant in a certain town, and his name was Lovelorn. To such an extent had love clouded his reason that, when his wife died, he gave much money in order to marry the daugh-

ter of a penniless shopkeeper. But the girl was heart-broken and could not bear to look at the old merchant. This, indeed, might have been anticipated.

Now one night, while she was turning her back to him in bed, a thief entered the house. And she was terrified at seeing a thief, and embraced her husband, old as he was. He, for his part, felt every limb thrill with astonishment and love, and he thought: "Gracious me! Why does she hug me tonight?" Then peering narrowly about, he discovered the thief in a corner, and reflected: "No doubt she embraces me from fear of him." So he said to the thief:

> "She who always shrank from me,
> Hugs me to her breast;
> Thank you, benefactor! Take
> What you like the best." [1]

Obviously comic, we say. But a modern naturalist interested, as it is the fashion to be, in the once decently inhibited discussions of sex, could easily make it spell near-tragedy for poor old Lovelorn. Or again, a modern reader who "feels" with Molière's perplexed Alceste, living in a world of bitter contradictions, can't do as the more intellectually curious seventeenth century did and find a cynical sport in his unsocial misanthropy; in our day it looks more like vivisection; and yet we call the *Misanthrope* comedy. On the other hand Molière would have found only comic laughter in *The Doll's House* or *The Wild Duck*. How shall we define this protean spirit?

Nor are comedy and the comic spirit limited to the drama. Dickens' novels—nearly all of them—are comedy; so are the novels of George Meredith, some of a bitter sort. Balzac called his the *Comédie Humaine,* perhaps in an effort to contrast their theme with that of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Burns' *Tam o' Shanter* is exquisite farce. There is comedy in Homer's *Iliad*. Here is the famous description of Thersites:

> . . . Only Thersites still chattered on, the uncontrolled of speech, whose mind was full of words many and disorderly, wherewith to

[1] Arthur W. Ryder, *Panchatantra*. Reprinted by permission of the University of Chicago Press.

strive against the chiefs idly and in no good order, but even as he deemed that he should make the Argives laugh. And he was ill-favoured beyond all men that came to Ilios. Bandy-legged was he, and lame of one foot, and his two shoulders rounded, arched down upon his chest; and over them his head was warped, and a scanty stubble sprouted on it.

Byron's *Don Juan* is full of it. It will give a point to the familiar essay: Addison's *Sir Roger de Coverley* is both comedy of manners and character: Lamb's *Poor Relations* is neat social satire. And it makes its presence known even in the briefest of lyrics:

> Venus, take my votive glass;
> Since I am not what I was,
> What from this day I shall be,
> Venus, let me never see.

From time immemorial comedy has been associated with laughter. It was in this manner that Aristotle approached it, calling it "a dramatic picture of the laughable." And again, "As for comedy, it is an imitation of men worse than the average; worse, however, not as regards any and every sort of fault, but as regards one particular kind, the laughable, which is a species of the ugly. The laughable may be defined as a mistake or a deformity not productive of pain or harm to others; the mask (comic mask), for instance, that excites laughter, is something ugly and distorted without causing pain." As in most of Aristotle's definitions, there was enough suggestion packed into these few lines to stir critical pens for two thousand years. What is the laughable? What is laughter? How shall we take the phrase "a mistake or a deformity not productive of pain or harm"? And above all, that enigma, "imitation of men worse than the average"; what does it mean? If we can answer these questions we shall have a fair start on the way to a discovery of a theory of comedy.

Again, in a work that goes back obviously to near-Aristotelian times, if not to the master, a brief essay on Comedy, translated and printed by Professor Lane Cooper in his book, *Aristotle on Comedy,* there is found this definition: "Comedy is an imitation

of an action that is ludicrous and imperfect, of sufficient length, . . . through pleasure and laughter effecting the purgation of the like emotions. It has laughter for its mother." Obviously the author of this, as he wrote, had the definition of tragedy by Aristotle under his eye. And it is this close parallelism in phrase that convinces me that it was some pupil, near or distant, and not the master who had a hand in this. And what is more, it is wrong, completely wrong, in what seems to be the most significant part of the definition, the purgation of pleasure and laughter by these emotions. What Aristotle knew or did not know about laughter we can only guess; but he knew a thing or two about the psychology of pleasure, as he shows us in the *Ethics*. The significant thing here is the reference again of comedy to laughter. "It has laughter for its mother," as tragedy has "grief for its mother." What is laughter?

The pity and terror of tragedy we have learned to describe as mental impulses, blending in the katharsis in the attitude of tragic calm. But obviously laughter is hardly an impulse. It bears too many of the marks of pure physical action, the happy convulsion of the body—

Laughter holding both his sides.

Or the smile, the movement of the sphincter muscle of the mouth, which may be called an ungrown laugh, as the laugh seems to be a grown-up smile, or the suppressed laugh which yet radiates a certain genial warmth within, though beyond a heightened color it may show nothing. These are only too obviously actions, results of something that has gone before; and it is for this that we must look. Many a soldier in the late war when he heard the explosion of a "heavy" near by—very near by—laughed. Why? A circus clown strains at a huge weight; raises it as his back bends and seems about to give way, and then—tosses it into the air; it is not a weight at all, but an empty bladder—and you laugh. Why? A policeman offers to take his girl for a ride, saying he has one of the department cars for the evening. He fills the young lady and the neighbors with dismay by driving up with the patrol

wagon. Why does one laugh? Why do children burst into a titter when the strict teacher for a moment turns his back? I remember clearly my struggle with the first problem in Euclid's geometry, and when finally I understood it, I laughed. Why?

Tears and laughter, smiling and crying, are not so different in one way. We say tears are a relief for grief. The state of mind of grief, or anger sometimes, has so affected the body and through the nervous system the secretions of the body, that some bodily action is necessary. In anger the appropriate action is a blow, in grief loud lamentation and violent gestures; we inhibit these, but carry off the stored-up energy in the convulsion of sobs and tears or in expletives. Similarly the trembling of fear, when flight is inhibited, is an obvious nervous and muscular carrying off of the energy stored up to permit flight. Laughter, too, that "happy convulsion of the body," is the physical response to some sudden mental or physical condition demanding some form of action. What is it? Of what state of mind is laughter a relief?

Laughter is a relief of energy stored up, but for another purpose; it is a diversion of energy which suddenly finds itself not needed, and thus breaks out over the spillway of laughter. It is a sudden and unexpected relaxation, for the effort that was expected has suddenly not been required, and the body ready to do something else now laughs. Or as Gregory puts it, laughter "substitutes for action by the body action in the body." And thus, to go back to the post-Aristotelian definition, if laughter has pleasure connected with it, it is the pleasure of relief. The soldier laughed at the exploding shell in sheer relief—he had not been hit. With the circus clown we are in actual physical distress at his muscular effort and pain, and when we find that all the pother was to no purpose, we too let go. The bodily energy stored up against the effort is let loose suddenly in the physical convulsion. With the policeman it is the unexpected, and yet the hugely appropriate; and the incongruous, just because it is unexpected, is a release, a release because it is so appropriate. Had he brought her a circus chariot or a limousine or a Noah's Ark we should only have been bewildered. The children laugh when teacher's back

is turned, because for a moment there is a release from the tension. Their effort at keeping still is not needed for a moment. And I laughed at the ease of Euclid for all my effort, just as we laugh at the ease with which the clown throws the painted weights. I think we have noted one thing more; in some cases the relief has been purely physical, in others seemingly purely mental—if we make a distinction which we cannot always keep. The laugh at the patrol wagon was due to the incongruity of the situation; the others were at the sudden termination of a tense moment. It is not difficult to put one's finger on the one of all these causes for laughter that could be a subject for comedy.

But I think we can carry this examination of laughter at least one step farther. George Eliot once wrote: "Strange as the genealogy may sound, the original parentage of that wonderful and delicious mixture of fun, fancy, philosophy, and feeling, which constitutes modern humor, was probably the cruel mockery of a savage at the writhings of a suffering enemy." I think we shall find some truth in this. Gregory in his book, the *Nature of Laughter,* has this: "As laughter emerges with man from the mists of antiquity it seems to hold a dagger in its hand." The earliest laughter was probably cruel, the triumphant laughter of the victor in a physical combat with his enemy, whose sudden dispatch released the stored-up energy in the conqueror, which broke out in a vindictive taunt. There are numerous such episodes in Homer; for example:

> Paris drew the center of his bow; nor vainly did the shaft fly from his hand, for he smote the flat of the right foot of Diomedes, and the arrow went clean through, and stood fixed in the earth; right sweetly laughing Paris leaped up from his lair, and boasted.

There is no essential difference between the boasting of Paris and the crowing of a victorious cock.

This is the laughter of pure superiority, the relief one feels when the tension of fear or energetic effort is relaxed, and the object one is contending with is suddenly delivered into one's hands. It very easily passes into the smile of contempt, or the laugh with which persons in a less sensitive age greeted the appearance of deformity

or weakness. The very helplessness of these last makes them ludicrous. In effect, it is not very different also from the laugh which in the cruder Elizabethan days was called out when insanity was put on the stage, and in our own when we see hilarious stage drunkenness. But why, we may ask, is drunkenness on the street not ludicrous, but to some even fearful? The answer is easy; on the stage it is harmless, like a monster in a menagerie. And it is this sense of superiority that laughter sometimes gives that led Oliver Wendell Holmes to write: "Do you know that you feel a little superior to every man who makes you laugh, whether by making faces or verses? Are you aware that you have a pleasant sense of patronizing him? . . ." Perhaps a somewhat too sweeping statement; but in it also we catch one clue to what Aristotle meant when he wrote that comedy imitates "men worse than the average."

From this laughter of "sudden glory" when we see a possible rival at our mercy, or a person essentially so weak or contemptible that his enmity is futile, we get the famous definition of laughter given many years ago by the English philosopher, Hobbes. It is a sudden "conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmities of others." And by contrast the same laughter brings humiliation to its victim, as Bergson noted, and as history and our own private lives can abundantly bear witness to. Comedy can make use of both of these varieties of laughter. Of this type, in particular, is the laughter of satire; only in satire the infirmities exposed are more than physical—though the bitterest satire, like Juvenal's, has indulged in thrusts at personal appearance. It exploits all manner of delinquencies—social, political, personal, moral; and in an age of refined speech its weapon may be as refined in cruelty, for it drives mercilessly, when in the hands of a Juvenal or of the anonymous author of the *Satire Ménippée,* or of a Pope, into "quivering sensibilities."

But laughter, though it began with a dagger in its hand, does not always carry the weapon. There is the laugh at what we shall call simply the incongruous, as that which greeted the policeman with his patrol. This precisely fits Emerson's description: the occa-

sion of laughter "is some seeming, some keeping of the word to the ear and eye, whilst it is broken to the soul." In this form of laughter the relief is mental rather than physical, a mental shock followed by a mental relief— a feeling of the appropriateness, or most excellent inappropriateness of the unexpected. It is for this reason that Aristotle uses the illustration of the comic mask, which is grotesque but does not cause pain—Bergson would also add, because the wearer is unaware of its eccentricity. At its best, as Meredith describes it, such laughter is "of the order of the smile, finely tempered, showing sun-light of the mind, mental richness rather than noisy enormity."

When sympathy with the ludicrous or grotesque object is felt, the tone of the laughter changes and we have what we call humor. But at this point our philosophers begin to disagree. Bergson can't laugh at anything for which he has a spark of sympathy:

> Depict some fault, however trifling, in such a way as to arouse sympathy, fear, or pity; the mischief is done, it is impossible to laugh. . . . The comic will come into being whenever a group of men concentrate their attention on one of their number, imposing silence on their emotions, and calling into play nothing but their intelligence.

With Bergson is also Meredith, who is sure that comic laughter goes no deeper than the intellect, and comedy "watches over sentimentality with a birch rod," and, he adds, thus keeps society pure and sane.[1] But whether these authorities like it or not, we have the ludicrous characters of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, and a large number of others, including even the heroic Falstaff, with whom it is impossible, quite, to keep from feeling a large degree of sympathy. We laugh at and love at the same time, as we do repeatedly also in life with our friends.

This is the laughter of humor, when the incongruous is softened, and the grotesque becomes an object even of affection. Saintsbury has given humor this definition: "it is a feeling and presen-

[1] Another philosopher, MacDougall, goes so far as to say that we laugh to avoid having sympathy aroused. "Laughter is primarily and fundamentally the antidote of sympathetic pain." It is a "defense of the organism against the many minor pains to which man is exposed by reason of the high sensitivity of his primitive sympathetic tendencies." There will be a word at the end of the chapter on this value of comedy, as well as on Meredith's feeling that at least one of the purposes of comedy is to keep society sane.

tation of the ludicrous, including sympathetic, or at least meditative, transcendency." There is something heavy in this. We might try again from Thackeray: "The humorous writer professes to awaken and direct your love, your pity, your kindness—your scorn for untruth, pretension, imposture—your tenderness for the weak, the poor, the oppressed, the unhappy." This perhaps sins a trifle on the side of extravagance, for it comes near to identifying the humorous and the serious. But Coleridge also speaks of the "congruity of humor with pathos"; and here we shall leave it, only giving the phrase of Pater: "the laughter which blends with tears, and even with the subtleties of the imagination, and which in its most exquisite motive is one with pity."

But there are yet other varieties of laughter that are of value to comedy. There is that of pure joy. Steele speaks of laughter as "a vent of any sudden joy." We know it all too well to enter far into a description of this specific smile. The poet Milton knew it, in his youth, when he wrote *L'Allegro:*

> Haste thee, Nymph, and bring with thee
> Jest and youthful jollity.

Shakespeare must have known it when he indulged his imagination in the free excursion of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Greig can thus describe this "momentary holiday," this particular "lapse from earnestness," when it manifests itself in a love story: "The laugh thus marks an interruption to the behavior of love which has been overcome with a less expenditure of energy than was originally prepared for the purpose." Only for a tale like *As You Like It* or *Twelfth Night* the expenditure is also in a different and even an eccentric manner, and the joy of accomplished love over the irrelevant or grotesque difficulties is rewarded by the smile of the romantic comedy.

Though it is possible thus to distinguish between the varieties of laughter—the laugh of superiority, physical or mental; the laugh of amusement at some ludicrous incident or person, a laugh in turn that may or may not be accompanied by animus; the laugh of playful sympathy; the laugh of sheer joy; and there are others,

for these do not by any means exhaust the list—nevertheless, we must constantly bear in mind that any catalogue is subject to the obvious fact that, as Greig says, there is a wide range of "relativity in laughter." It is easily seen that there are different degrees of contagion in any one subject for a laugh—what one laughs at will leave another cold. Some people seem even immune against laughter; there are those of vinegar aspect whose faces never break out into a smile—the "agelasts" or "misogelasts," as Meredith calls them, foes to laughter in all of its aspects.

Even in those who are quickly infected with the attitude of laughter there is a wide range of difference. "In various persons," writes Hartley, "the occasion of laughter must be as different as their opinions and dispositions." This is nothing more than to reiterate a truth we have long ago learned, that a person's response to experience will depend upon his background. There are passages in Aristophanes which doubtless brought down the house in ancient Athens but which leave us bewildered; there are jests of his which make us hold our noses. And the play of wit in a Shaw would have been quite unintelligible to the Roman audience of Plautus or Terence. *Vice versa,* even Horace, living in Rome two centuries after Plautus, chides the old Roman public for enjoying his *sales numéros.* And Boileau, the contemporary of Molière, gathers his skirt about him when he discusses his friend's escapades:

> *Dans ce sac ridicule où Scapin s'enveloppe,*
> *Je ne reconnois plus l'auteur du Misanthrope.*

The truth is that we judge, or can judge, a man by what he will laugh at; it is a key, and an unfailing one, to his character. And similarly we can judge an age by the kind of jest that lingers longest on its lips. For if laughter, as again Greig says, be the true catholic, that is, the universal attitude, it is one which has no single tradition and no fixed articles of belief.

Furthermore, as we trace the story of laughter in history and above all in comedy, we discover quickly that gradually the cruelty and even the asperity of laughter tends to be replaced by sym-

pathy, and humor more and more comes to be the refined or accepted attitude of amusement. Even Hobbes, to whom laughter was ever bitter, wrote that there is a laughter "void of offence," but it "must be at the absurdities and infirmities abstracted from persons." We cannot quite agree with this, for there is humor which does cling about the absurdities of personality. And it is permitted to believe that there is as much genuine amusement and as clear a pleasure in the laugh of humor as there ever was in the boisterous hilarity of the cruel laugh of ancient comedy. There is no sign yet that our richer endowment of sensibility and sympathy has tended to make laughter one of the lost arts,[1] or that laughter is about to die of an excess of dignity.

Frankly, it is beyond my purpose to attempt a definition of comedy. I am not at all sure that one is necessary after the one given by Aristotle. The field is open and anyone may try his hand at a definition of this elusive spirit—the only troublesome thing is that there are so many comedies that we can't quite place. In this review of laughter as the terminus of some varieties of experience, I hope I may indicate the only possible clue to a definition. Nor, on the other hand, am I greatly impressed by the numerous efforts that each age has made to classify comedies into certain well-established types—comedy of humor—comedy of manners—comedy of character—romantic comedy—farce—intrigue—etc., etc., the list is impressive, and often utterly hopeless. For example, Molière's *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* is farce, is comedy of character, it is also comedy of intrigue and, I suspect, it might also be called a comedy of manners; so conflicting are the symptoms that it is impossible to arrive at a perfect diagnosis. Much more profitable, and also within our powers, will it be to describe some of our better-known comic experiences and to refer these to comedies that we can read and enjoy.

But first it seems possible to set off satire, as the experience has

[1] One is sometimes, however, tempted to think so when one reads the heavy pages of the modern realists, with their plodding emphasis on the dreary emptiness of life and the absence of any redeeming values. In this tangled wilderness it is refreshing now and then to catch a glimpse of the blue when we light upon a small clearing made by the blessing of comic humor. Today, when the "serious" science of psychology has made so sodden our imagination, we need, and the need is pressing, an Aristophanes to write a new comedy. Only its title will not be *The Clouds!*

a personal quality and a vindictiveness at times that seems quite inconsistent with comedy. It was "indignation" that "made the verses" of Juvenal a condemnation of a society and of a manners that fell short, and far short, of the author's ideal. It may be deeply emotional and take the form of a poetic and personal indictment. Of such a nature is a large part of Pope's *Dunciad,* or parts of his *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot,* as, for example, these well-known lines in which he pays an oblique compliment to Addison:

> Should such a man, too fond to rule alone,
> Bear, like the Turk, no brother near the throne,
> View him with scornful, yet with jealous eyes,
> And hate for arts that caus'd himself to rise;
> Damn with faint praise, assent with civil leer,
> And without sneering, teach the rest to sneer;
> Willing to wound, and yet afraid to strike,
> Just hint a fault, and hesitate dislike;
> Alike reserv'd to blame, or to commend,
> A tim'rous foe, and a suspicious friend.

At times Pope forgets his sting, and in his *Imitations of Horace* catches the genial attitude of the satirist who mingled the sweet of his good manners with the useful of his advice to a wayward generation:

> Time was, a sober Englishman would knock
> His servants up, and rise at five o'clock,
> Instruct his Family in ev'ry rule,
> And send his Wife to church, his Son to school.

It is the bitter laugh of superior contempt for baseness, for injustice, or for any complete severance from the poet's ideal, that is the motive for this experience. It is often far more extended in its range, as in the long satire of Rabelais or that of Swift, taking the form of voyages to imaginary countries whose manners are held up in satirical contrast to our own. This, for example, is from *Gulliver:*

> And, to set forth the valor of my own dear countrymen, I assured him that I had seen them blow up a hundred enemies at once in a

siege, and as many in a ship; and beheld the dead bodies drop down in pieces from the clouds, to the great diversion of the spectators.

I was going on to more particulars, when my master commanded me silence. He said, whoever understood the nature of the *Yahoos* might easily believe it possible for so vile an animal to be capable of every action I had named, if their strength and cunning equalled their malice. But as my discourse had increased his abhorrence of the whole species, so he found it gave him a disturbance in his mind, to which he was wholly a stranger before. He thought his ears, being used to such abominable words, might, by degrees, admit them with less detestation; that although he hated the *Yahoos* of this country, yet he no more blamed them for their odious qualities than he did a *gnnayh* (a bird of prey) for its cruelty, or a sharp stone for cutting his hoof. But when a creature pretending to reason could be capable of such enormities, he dreaded lest the corruption of that faculty might be worse than brutality itself. He seemed confident that, instead of reason, we were only possessed of some quality fitted to increase our natural vices; as the reflection from a troubled stream returns the image of an ill-shapen body, not only larger, but more distorted.

There is frequently satire in comedy, as in Aristophanes' best-known plays; but the spirit of satire is too bitter, and the indignation too personal, to permit comedy ever to be all satire. Satire is too close to the triumphant laughter of pure superiority, it carries the dagger too nakedly exposed, to allow it the universality of interest and pleasure that is the secret of comedy. Or to return to the definition of Aristotle, it is designed to give pain, for its purpose is obvious reproof and castigation. And for this very reason, to sugar-coat its pill, satire frequently adopts a fantastic garb that assures it a welcome before its true nature is revealed, and only gradually does it show its teeth. Such is the hugely grotesque paraphernalia of Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel,* stories of imaginary giants and their ways, while the thoughtful reader, under the visor of the fantastic, reads the lineaments of the French society of the writer's own day, and the features even of some of its best-known personages. So Swift puts his imagination to work on the ludicrous journeys of Lemuel Gulliver, and under the

guise of dwarfs and giants, Yahoos and Laputans, and wise and benevolent four-footed Houyhnhnms, poniards the vices and the littleness and the contemptible manners of eighteenth-century England. In our own day, H. G. Wells in his *New Utopia* has a mild satire for our industrial civilization; and above all, that greatest of modern cynics, Anatole France, with his brilliant wit and bitter smile, has given us some thought to take to heart in his *Penguin Island*. As long as men will note the deficiencies of their times and contrast them with the ideal, there will be the laughter of contempt, or Satire.[1]

With the laughter at the grotesque or incongruous, we approach comedy. "The feeling of comedy," writes Lipps, "arises so far as anything which is significant or impressive, or which seems so to us, comes short, for us, of its significance or impressiveness." It is the deceived expectation, the unexpected or irrelevant turn taken by what looks to be a purely normal incident or character, that is the source of the laughter and the secret of the comic pleasure. But immediately we discover a large variety in the incongruous. In the first place, the laugh may be with or without animus. And, further, it may be at the incongruity of the incident or the eccentricity of the character. And, finally, the nature of the laugh may also be taken into account; for it may be boisterous, or quiet and refined. It is this rather complex character of this variety of the comic that has caused some who would classify comedies a good deal of trouble.

Perhaps the table on the following page will help to make this effort at a division clear. But immediately I would like to add that any such division is impossible to maintain long, for almost any play will show characteristics that will put it into more than one division.

The incongruousness of the incident may be the tale of the comedy. The old jests and storybooks of the Middle Ages were a mine for comic material of this sort for the new comedy of the Renaissance. Chaucer's scandalous stories in the *Canterbury*

[1] There is, it might be said in passing, a difference, and a fundamental one, between satire and invective. Invective shares the contempt, but its expression is not associated with laughter.

- With animus
  - Comedy of incident or intrigue
    - boisterous—farce—Molière, *Le Malade Imaginaire*
    - refined—Congreve, *Way of the World*
  - Comedy of character
    - boisterous—Jonson, *The Alchemist*
    - refined—Molière, *Tartuffe* or *Les Femmes Savantes*
- Without animus
  - Comedy of incident or intrigue
    - boisterous—farce—Shakespeare, *Comedy of Errors*
    - refined—Plautus, *Captives* or Sheridan, *Rivals* (in part)
  - Comedy of character
    - boisterous—Shakespeare's Falstaff in *Henry IV*
    - refined—Molière, *Misanthrope*

Tales, the *novelle* of Boccaccio and his followers, the free *"esprit Gaulois"* of France as we catch it in the well-known and excellent comedy of *Maître Pathelin*—these became the stock plots of later comedy. Corneille perhaps has given the best description of a favorite: "Two lovers, separated by some trick put on them or by some authority not to be denied, are united by the trick's being revealed to them, or by the consent of those who were responsible for the obstacle." But his best comedy, *Le Menteur,* hardly fills this bill, for it is in part at least also a comedy of character.

Yet it is interesting to see how Labiche or Scribe, Shaw or Barrie, in the comedy of incident take over the old situations and give them a new abiding place and name. It is amazing how many stock plots have been worked off by succeeding generations of comedy writers—the story of twins separated and reunited, as in Plautus' *Menæchmi* and Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors,* and in similar comedies in Italy, Spain, France, Germany, by the score. The tricks played by sharpers upon gullible age; upon husbands by their wives, and upon wives by their husbands; and the eternal triangle, varied sometimes as father and son become rivals for the same girl—a catalogue could easily be made of the kind of incidents the popular imagination has found interesting and laughable.[1]

What has tended to keep the intrigue, in all of its variations, modern and ancient, in the tradition of comedy more than anything else has been the large acceptance for stage comedy of the laws of the dramatic unities, and especially of time and place. For only a brief story with a sudden dénouement can be condensed into such narrow requirements. Thus Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* all takes place during the few hours of an evening; so also Sheridan's *Rivals,* and the same is true of the action of nearly all of the comedies of the Restoration. It is really astonishing, too, how many modern comedies are thus condensed into a brief action. Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan* takes less than twenty-four hours; Maugham's *Our Betters,* takes twenty-four hours.

A variation of this variety is the so-called romantic comedy of love and adventure. At one wing are the sword and cape comedies popular in Spain, France, and England during the seventeenth century. Shakespeare did something toward it in his *As You Like It;* but it was Lope de Vega in Spain who gave romantic comedy its international reputation. To add to its flavor were

[1] Something ought to be said here about the grossness in many of these old plots and in the speech of many of the characters. It is obvious to remark that we find much in the acts and speech of early comedy objectionable today. Even at our worst, we do not act and talk in that way. I am thinking now of Plautus, of Ben Jonson, of *Maître Pathelin,* of Dame Quickly. Grossness may be due to the rollicking spirit of a gross age, or it may be due to an effort to satirize vice. If we hold our noses, we must do it with a difference. It is not contemporary manners we are seeing.

sometimes added all the ingredients of necromancy and astrology and the black arts, as in Shakespeare's *Tempest* and *Midsummer Night's Dream*. I will give the brief summary by Lanson of the plot of Rotrou's *Agésilan de Colchos* (1636) as a sample of a once popular brew:

> A clearing where cavaliers cross swords. A garden where ladies are gathering flowers, near a fountain, as they exchange delicate gallantries; an abandoned mistress who condemns all aspirants to the hand of her daughter to bring her the head of an infidel; a lover masking in woman's dress that he may have access to an incomparable damsel-whose portrait he has seen by accident, then without time to change his smock engaging in a duel with an errant prince who goes up and down the world vaunting that no beauty can equal that of his lady-love; frightful idolatries, furious vengeances, a silly captain, heroes that call themselves Florisel de Niquée or Agésilan de Colchos, and an action that takes place in the kingdom of Guindaye.

We know this turn of comedy better in the romances of Walter Scott or of Dumas, but it runs into the drama over and over again. Danger and love, a serious situation that unexpectedly becomes harmless—the holiday from the serious and the laughter of relief. We catch it in Rostand's *Romancers,* and again in his *Cyrano de Bergerac,* which no one would call a tragedy. Its bourgeois counterpart, and infinitely below it in significance, is the romance of heroes and heroines who exchange velvet and lace for corduroy and gingham, perfect creatures, forest rangers and cowboys and tender village maidens, exported all from the east side of New York to give an evening's enjoyment at the cinema or in the cheap magazine. The charm of this sort of comedy, whether good or bad, will never die, for it fills a void in dull and commonplace lives.

One of the most interesting developments of romantic comedy is that which took place largely independently in India. How far it was influenced by the Greeks, who went into northern India with Alexander the Great and for some centuries gave the country a taste of Hellenic and Bactrian culture, we can only conjecture. But we have plays, many of them, by dramatists and

poets, some of them of high rank; men like Kalidasa, Bhavabhuti and Bhasa, who have left plays unique and interesting. Those best known to the western world are Kalidasa's *Sakuntala* and the earlier *Mrichchhakatika,* better known as the *Clay Cart.* The former is in the full romantic love tradition with poetry and the supernatural to give it atmosphere and background. The *Clay Cart* is more realistic with more convincing characters.

But in nothing is the vast difference between the orient and occident more apparent than in the romance of *Sakuntala.* She is the foster daughter of a holy hermit living in the forests of India. The king, Dushyanta, has been out hunting and meets her in the forest and romantically falls in love with and weds her in an approved manner. They have their moment of perfect bliss and then are separated, he going back to the court; but before he leaves he gives her a ring in token of their union. On his departure she is so absorbed in her love that she fails to heed the call of a visiting holy man, and in anger he pronounces a curse. She will no longer be remembered by her husband until she shows him the ring. The story then is the long desolation wrought in both their lives by this curse, he remembering his hurt but not her face or name, she denied his presence, and an exile. And when the reunion comes, as in Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale,* after many years, it is not to the joyous acceptance of a beautiful autumn of love, but to the meaning of peace through renunciation. Indian romance never ends quite happily, for happiness is too unstable a quality and farthest from the peace that means the extinguishing of desire. It is not with desires satisfied and love won that the Indian romance closes, but with desire in ashes and love revealed as the spark that quickens longing. This is the story of the Indian drama; it is the theme of the Indian epics; and it is the heart of the Indian philosophy of life.

On the other hand, there is the comedy that is primarily interested in some eccentricity or some exaggeration in character. Aristophanes was the first, among those whose comedies are extant, who exploited the possibilities of comic character. But

his pictures in the main are of persons well known to his audience —Cleon, dictator of Athens; Socrates, the philosopher; Euripides, the poet—and his influence on modern comedy is only indirect. It was the Athenian "new" comedy of Menander that began the practice, since become classic, of seizing upon certain peculiar types of characters and pillorying their weaknesses for public edification. It was thus that comedy got its type characters, just as it got its type plots; and the huge popularity of these types tended to make of them a tradition that has lasted, again, down to our own time. There is the miser, seen first in Plautus' *Aulularia,* or *Pot of Gold*. He is only a trifle changed when he appears in Molière's *L'Avare*. There is the *Miles Gloriosus,* the boastful soldier, out of whom Shakespeare molded his Falstaff, and to whom later Shaw in his "chocolate-cream soldier" in *Arms and the Man* has given a modern and ironic twist. There is the hungry parasite who gulls his patron out of money and meals, always complaining about the emptiness of his stomach, and always ready, for a price, to lend his hand to any promising bit of intrigue. We might go on indefinitely. There is the old nurse, the Italian *balia,* the Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet,* who in the tragedy is a comic figure, and who is repeated with modern variations in plays and stories where the heroine needs an older confidante or the hero a pliable messenger. It almost seems that comedy does better with stock characters for the very ease with which they are received. Everyone knows them and on sight recognizes them with a laugh.

But there is the comedy which is interested even more deeply in the implications of the comic character's eccentricity; and the play is the unfolding of his character in its full significance, and its effect upon all who come under his influence. The best known of this class is Molière's *Tartuffe*. Orgon, the host, has been brought up by a strict, religious family; his mother, Madame Pernelle, is a *dévote*. In his youth he had been a soldier and had distinguished himself. His wife had given him two children, and then had died. Later in life he marries again, a young woman who brings into the orderly and drab household a touch of color

from the outside world; and now the family, a boy just reaching manhood and a girl ready to accept a husband, for the first time begin to know the joy of polite diversion.

It is precisely at this moment that Tartuffe, the religious impostor, meets Orgon and accepts his hospitality, for Orgon is ready to make the grand renunciation, his conscience has been troubling him, and he is eager for the faith and devotion of his childhood. Nowhere can there be a better atmosphere for the hypocrite. He is astute, ruthless, and sensual. And the complete ruin of the family is averted only by the long arm of poetic justice. Tartuffe is too great a character to be a type. He is a personality, and almost tragic in his baleful significance. He is a personality, not a type, for his actions do not square with his character; he is astute, but he falls in love quite unwisely with his host's wife, when the daughter had been offered to him in marriage. And his failure to be true to type is his undoing.

Molière's *Misanthrope* is even a more complex study of character. Alceste is a young—not too young—gentleman at court, highly respected for his intelligence and virtue by all; even strangers press to gain his acquaintance. He has fallen in love, perhaps unwisely, with Célimène, a young widow whose first marriage had been sequestered and unhappy. She will no longer allow herself to be mewed up for only one's man's delectation. We must not blame the young woman too much. But before the play opens Alceste has received one ugly shock that has shaken his faith in mankind. He has been brought by supposed friends to a trial, and stands to lose some property. The play opens exactly at this point when he is still racked with pain and disillusionment. At this most inappropriate moment a young fop comes in with an elaborate compliment and a request that some verses he has composed be criticized. Alceste knows he is in no mood to speak justly of anything, and begs to be excused. But pushed to the wall he tells the truth, and more than the truth, until it hurts. He is even unjust in his candor; and angry he rushes off for comfort to the woman he loves. Unfortunately he arrives at a most inopportune time—she is in one of her lighter

moods and receiving callers. He naturally resents her gaiety and chides, instead of telling her the truth, and—the rest of the play is the story of the havoc played in a good man's life by a series of situations where candor cannot flourish. Alceste is no type, he is not the characteristic misanthrope; he is Alceste, the man, like Hamlet, "more sinned against than sinning," and his end is comic only because the wound he carries is not so deep as that which killed his English kinsman.

With Tartuffe and Alceste Molière has given us the finest examples of the comedy of character. The one shows the effect of a certain type of personality upon his immediate environment, like a parasite upon a host; the other is the effect of a certain environment on a personality. The plays are complimentary studies. The plot catches these characters at the moment of stress, during a conflict, internal and external, and the comedy is the exploitation of the peculiarities of the characters—those exaggerations or eccentricities that give it its comic flavor. In the slighter comedies of character the plan of the character, that is, his special comic significance, is plain and all his actions easily accounted for by this peculiarity. This is true in Ben Jonson's "comedies of humour," like *Every Man in his Humour* or the *Alchemist;* it is true in a lesser degree in Molière's *Les Femmes Savantes,* or in Shaw's *Man and Superman;* but in Molière's two great character studies or, as we prefer to call them, studies in comic personality, the formula breaks down. This is no more than to say that the greatest comedy in essence comes near to the serious effect and value of tragedy.

It is this fact that gives its incompleteness and general lack of convincingness to the theory of comedy found in Bergson's *Le Rire*. To him it is chiefly character that is ludicrous, and it is so because there is "something mechanical encrusted on the living," or, as he explains, "the attitudes, gestures, and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine." And the plots are governed by the mechanical devices of dupery and coincidence. Transferred to the realm of character, this means that only those characters are

ludicrous that have become, as it were, automatic or machine-like in their responses, and their eccentricities have become of such potency with them that they can act in no other way; and above all their ridiculousness is the more convincing as they are unaware of their defects. There are always parasites, always misers, always doting old fools, and each act of theirs always betrays the curious lack of balance of the mechanism within. This may well be true of the lesser stock characters of stock comedy, where plots change but the characters merely change their names, or do not even do this, as in the old *Commedia dell' Arte* of Italy. Harlequin and Pantaloon and Colombine and Brighella are just such characters, consecrated to their rôles by a long tradition; as are also the braggart soldier, the hungry parasite, the procurer, the old nurse. But it was Molière and Shakespeare in particular who broke this tradition; and it certainly was not a tradition for Aristophanes with some of his best characters. Even Molière's *L'Avare,* Harpagon, is not quite a stock character, for he falls in love in a manner quite inconsistent with his miserly rôle. For whenever free personality tends to displace pure eccentricity, it tends also to destroy the mechanism of character.

What I have just written is also an argument against the too literal acceptance of what Dr. Butcher calls the "generalizing power of comedy."[1] The old tradition is, and Dr. Butcher accepts it, that "comedy has species and tragedy has individuals." This phrase of Diderot he translates into his own language thus: "In brief, it may be said that comedy, in its unmixed sportive form, creates idealized persons." I prefer not to use the words "ideals" and "idealized," as their meaning is often obscure. But if we take the best in our best comedies, ancient and modern, I think we shall find, as with Molière, a desire to deal with real human beings. But in doing this the element of sympathy will tend to enter, and we shall have humor and not grotesque comedy.

George Bernard Shaw wrote in one of his prefaces: "When a comedy is performed it is nothing to me to see the spectators laugh; I want to see how many of them, laughing or grave, are

[1] See Butcher, *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art.*

in a melting mood." The full significance of this we shall see later; but this "melting mood" is exactly the thing one expects to experience, and does, in comedy when the ridiculous is tinged with humor. It is in such plays that the comic fault becomes something other than the mere comic exaggeration, and approaches the level of the tragic fault which gives rise to the tragic catastrophe. Contrast, for example, the dénouement of Sheridan's *Rivals* with Shaw's *Mrs. Warren's Profession.* In the former the unfolding of the action is as regular and mechanical in its devices as a machine. At exactly the proper moment, like the cuckoo in the clock, coincidences and accidents happen, the characters display their appropriate faculties, and all ends as it should, happily. In the other we have the nearer approach to life with characters acting not by springs released at the right moment, but by motives whose origins lie deeper in personality, and the end, though not nearly so mechanically satisfying, is morally far more convincing. It is this moral convincingness that leaves us in the so-called "melting mood."

It goes without saying that in a perfect society, where there is always perfection of character, there can be no comedy; but it is also probably true that as our knowledge of character becomes more nearly perfect we shall have more and more subtle comedies which carry us farther and farther away from the old stock faults that the classical comedies have canonized and its apostles have tried to find mechanical descriptions of. And it is precisely because the author is doing just this that one feels the larger convincingness in the better-known plays of Shaw or Arthur Schnitzler. Plays like the latter's *Young Medardus,* or the *Green Cockatoo,* or Shaw's *Cæsar and Cleopatra,* or *Androcles and the Lion,* or *Candida,* or *Man and Superman,* are efforts in this modern direction. The fact that sometimes they fail to catch the gaiety of the old comedy should not be held too resolutely against them; even Molière was not always gay—who can describe his *Tartuffe* or *Misanthrope* by such an adjective?—and life itself today in this time of transition is not quite certain even what gaiety means.

One must not forget the value to comedy of wit and jest in the dialogue. Wit is not an aid to comedy, nor a special pungency that is added to increase the comic flavor. It is a source of the comic laugh itself. Its value lies in the suddenness of its stroke, and its essence is the bringing together unexpectedly of two quite paradoxical elements. It is like fire and powder coming together, and the wit is the sudden explosion. An ancient Sicilian comic poet had it when in one of his comedies he called a wife "an elegant calamity." It is grotesqueness or incongruity in speech, as farce is incongruity in situation, and caricature is incongruity in character. It may sin on the side of pure nonsense, as in the speeches of Dame Quickly or Mrs. Malaprop. This, for obvious reasons, is not so popular today. Or it may be a sheer display of dextrous imaginative intelligence, like this dialogue from Lucian's *Sale of Creeds.* It is the shade of the old Greek philosopher Chrysippus speaking to a dealer who proposes to buy him:

SEVENTH DEALER: Oh subtle! What else can you tell me?

CHRYS: I have verbal involutions, for the better hampering, crippling, and muzzling of my antagonists. This is performed by the use of the far-famed syllogism.

SEVENTH D: Syllogism! I warrant him a tough customer.

CHRYS: Take a case. You have a child?

SEVENTH D: Well, and what if I have?

CHRYS: A crocodile catches him as he wanders along the bank of a river, and promises to restore him to you, if you will first guess correctly whether he means to restore him or not. Which are you going to say?

SEVENTH D: A difficult question. I don't know which way I should get him back soonest. In Heaven's name, answer for me, and save the child before he is eaten up.

CHRYS: Ha, ha. I will teach you far other things than that.[1]

Or it is brilliancy in speech, packing commonplace things in most extraordinary wrappers. I take these from Oscar Wilde:

I think that life is far too important a thing ever to talk seriously about it.

[1] Fowler tr.

The most dreadful people seem to go everywhere. They certainly come to my parties.

A well tied tie is the first serious step in life.

Nothing succeeds like excess.

The youth in America is their oldest tradition.

Somewhat like these are the swollen phrases that denote a large discrepancy between the thought and the words selected for its expression. Hamlet ridicules this habit in his words with young Osric:

Osr: Sir, here is newly come to court Laertes; believe me, an absolute gentleman, full of the most excellent differences, of very soft society and great showing: indeed, to speak feelingly of him, he is the card or calendar of gentry, for you shall find in him the continent of what part a gentleman would see.

Ham: Sir, his definement suffers no perdition in you; though, I know to divide him inventorially would dizzy the arithmetic of memory, and yet but yaw neither, in respect of his quick sail. But, in the verity of extolment, I take him to be a soul of great article: and his infusion of such dearth and rareness, as, to make true diction of him, his semblable is his mirror; and who else would trace him, his umbrage, nothing more.

Osr: Your lordship speaks most infallibly of him.

Only here the phrases display not intelligence but vacuity.

It requires an age that is quick in intellectual curiosity to enjoy these more intelligent varieties of comedy, and a polished society to be amused by them. More than this— and I am paraphrasing Meredith—the age should be one of sound common sense, with ready power of observation. Otherwise these individual and social flaws and exaggerations will parade themselves undetected. For comedy in a way is society's revenge for departures from the normal, its laugh at eccentrics who otherwise might go unpunished. With these requirements Meredith includes the necessity of "equality between the sexes," as an afterthought or as a warning. I wonder what Aristophanes, that *gamin de génie,* the author of the

Parliament of Women, would have had to say about that. To all these Sidney Smith adds leisure, for "those who have nothing to do, must either be amused or expire with gaping."

In this last we have touched the chief theme of this chapter—the value of comedy. Comedy is essentially social; it "does not exist outside of the pale of the strictly human." More than this, it belongs to socially more or less homogeneous groups, and outside of your group what to you is comic may be considered quite normal or even desirable. To quote Sidney Smith again: "Eccentricity reigns in Bedlam because the eccentrics are undeterred by each other's laughter." In other words, there must be some standards of normality, of right or wrong, in conduct, some ways things are done, some accepted convention which when violated makes people stare and shake their heads. This is the earmark of a cultured society, whatever be its standard of culture. And an outsider coming into this society is at first as obtuse to its laughter as the man in Bergson's book, who when "asked why he did not weep at a sermon when everybody was shedding tears, replied: 'I don't belong to this parish.' "

Comedy in a way is society's scourge for bad manners or worse. Or as Sidney Smith puts it, "the feeling of the ridiculous produces an immense effect upon human affairs." Aristophanes was the first, in this long tradition of the usefulness of comic laughter, to call attention to the ridiculous pretensions of politicians and philosophers, to the effects of greed, to the dangers of litigation, and to the crime of war. No Hebrew prophet spoke more openly or more to the point when denouncing a people's wickedness, and none was more wholesome for the moral well-being of his community. Molière had something of the same idea of the seriousness of the comic mission, though not the wise inclusiveness of the Greek temper: "The business of comedy is to paint a picture of all the faults of men, and especially of the men of our age." "The most beautiful passages of serious ethics are more often of less power than a line of satire; and nothing better chides the majority of people than the picture of their faults. . . . You can easily endure scoldings, but you can't bear comic laughter." In-

deed, in some of his comedies Molière, in showing up vice, gets so interested in its true color as almost to forget to make it ridiculous. For at times a critic like Jules Lemaître fails to get amusement out of a play so farcical as *Le Malade Imaginaire;* so bitter is the contrast between the gullible husband and the cruel self-seeking wife that the play with him ends in a shudder, or a foolish laugh, or at best in a feeling of profound discomfort.

In spite of his seeming gaiety, there are depths of profound sadness in Molière. The horrors of the pit are ever being suddenly exposed, and the narrow lanes that separate laughter from tears. Alceste, a person utterly without humor himself, is a humorous character only by virtue of a wholesome belief in all of us that his malady is not an *idée fixe.* Orgon escapes only by grace of a comic device; and at best the scars of his cruel experience will never quite disappear. The philosophic ladies in *Les Femmes Savantes* are cruelly disillusioned; and what is there to take the place of gods, even false gods—and no gods are ever wholly false—when they are pulled down from their shrines? Molière, like Aristophanes, like all great writers of comedy, is a spirit in revolt against not only the petty foibles and vices of his day, but also some of the leading motives of human conduct universal in their power. How shall one expect that the careful spectator at his plays shall fail to read the bitter disillusionment under the mask of comic grotesqueness even in a play so hilarious as *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme?* This is what Shaw means by the "melting mood" in the audience. Only to romantic and illusioned youth, fresh and clean in motives and generous in heart, does Molière give his unquestioning sympathy. There is much of the Hebrew prophet Jeremiah under this gay French exterior, and the mask he wears often hides his tears.

This is no more than to say that under the mask of every good comedy there will be an "idea," a fundamental attitude that gives the play a philosophy of life. Molière and later comedy exploit it in the concrete passages of action and dialogue. Aristophanes exploits it in his so-called comic expositions—the long conversations between characters, in the veiled political and social allegory

of the action. Both do it by giving pictures of the social *milieu,* half realistic or wholly realistic, but always morally convincing. And as the characters pass and repass against this background, having their day, as all have it in real life, we catch glimpses of the meaning of this comic-tragic-farcical-heroic thing we call life. This is the poet's idea made concrete for our edification. It is so in all great comedy.

Indeed it is this idea that is the hallmark of great comedy, and that most clearly distinguishes the attitude of comedy from that of tragedy. In all the great plays of Aristophanes and Molière there is a seriousness of conflict that might well rouse the impulses of pity and terror. Alceste, like Hamlet, driven to desperation by a world in which he can find no sincere motive or character; Orgon and his family caught in the web of a heartless impostor; Demos bewildered by the chicanery of self-seeking politicians; the simple-minded countryman, in the *Acharnians,* single-handed waging a losing fight against the truculent war party—these themes are full of the serious implications of tragedy. But to our poets they are not tragic, for they are born with the shrug of comic laughter. Life to the comic poet is not serious enough to wear the tragic mask; the best gesture with which to meet the world and the irrelevancy or maliciousness of character and incident is the comic shrug; to probe too deeply into the matter—that way madness lies. The laughter may be bitter and disillusioned, but it has reason for its source.

It is for this reason also that nearly all great comedy leaves us alert and thoughtful, for it is the gift of a mind that has known the world and fought its way to a partial victory or a momentary truce and the reflection that the conflict is not worth the effort. I think I can see some of this spirit in the so-called tragi-comedies of Shakespeare—*Measure for Measure, All's Well, Pericles,* and above all *Troilus and Cressida.* They are, as it were, a reflection on the hopelessness of the tragic conflict and the rare discovery of its compensations. It were more discreet, so one might think him arguing, to stand aloof, refuse to take life seriously, wisely ask what it is all about, and smile the bitter smile of disillusion-

ment. Lesser persons may naïvely want their comedies to end happily, as King Louis XIV and the end of *Tartuffe*. But the wise man knows that things—even comedies—do not always or often end happily, a bitter dénouement even can be greeted with comic laughter.

But Shakespeare only once quite achieved this larger comic attitude. He has given us a galaxy of great comic characters that surpass those of any other comic poet except Aristophanes, Falstaff, Shylock, Pandarus, Malvolio, Touchstone, Jaques—the list is a long one and in it I refrain from putting his fools, clowns, countrymen, jesters, the ever-ready Dromios and Autolycuses. But they are all secondary figures, though when they appear on the stage all must instantly give way before them, for their aristocracy even their social betters instantly recognize. They give a touch of the comic idea, notably Falstaff, Touchstone, and Jaques, but they are never allowed to be more than minor satellites, these creations that are central suns. The reason lay perhaps with the audience as much as with the poet. English comedy before Shakespeare knew the farce and the romantic tale, but had not yet explored the comedy of character and manners. And Shakespeare was writing for the London stage and the London theater-goer, when romantic tragedy and romantic comedy were the vogue. The age and society were not yet as reflective and critical as in the days of Molière.

But notwithstanding his handicap Shakespeare did write one great comedy, *The Tempest;* and in it he wove the pattern of a truly great comic idea. Some biographers have thought of this as the poet's farewell to the magic of his art. Be Shakespeare Prospero or not, the play draws to a focus the poet's philosophy of life as has seldom been done in all literature; and the final attitude is purely comic—

"We are such stuff as dreams are made on."

Verily here we have the comic shrug at its wisest. Into the plot, too, there are blended comic characters of the most paradoxical sort, Ferdinand and Miranda, and against them Trinculo and his

drunken crew, Ariel and Caliban, and above them all the cosmic figure of Prospero, wise with the wisdom of Democritus, who after tragedy has learned the values of comic laughter.

In all great comedy, as in this play, there will be abundant opportunity for the exercise of irony. Of all great ironical figures in comic literature that of Caliban seems to stand supreme. "You taught me speech; and my profit on't is, I know how to curse." Ever in the background, a sinister figure, whose danger even Prospero cannot completely understand, he is the personification of the unintelligent and malicious forces arrayed against reason and order. He is not a tragic figure—he lacks an essential dignity —but he is never contemptible. Against him is the ironical restlessness of Ariel, in whom again we might find some allegorical significance; and between these, making use of both as occasion serves, but also at the mercy of both, is the world of human nature and human intelligence.

Irony in comedy manifests itself in much the same manner as in tragedy. It may, as in *Tartuffe* or the *Misanthrope* or as in *The Tempest,* be a comment on the way things go in the world, and how man's devices are often his undoing. *Tartuffe* was sincere only once in the play, when he fell in love with Elmire, but where his hypocrisy prospered his sincerity proved his undoing. The Misanthrope by every appeal he made for honesty and plain-dealing came to more and more grief and bewilderment. Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice,* which Shakespeare undoubtedly meant for a comedy, striving for revenge discovered the odds were hopeless, and finally was caught in the trap he had set for others. The most ironical thing in life is always the fact that our best efforts often invite catastrophe; this is a way things have of going in the world; and comedy is always at its best on this ironical theme.

But there is also another and more subtle way in which irony may manifest itself in comedy, as it does also in tragedy. The tragic poet can stimulate the tragic impulses of terror and pity by introducing the boldest of comic farce at a moment of tragic tenseness. The writer of comedy likewise can project his situation

of comic laughter against a sinister background suggestive of tragedy. We laugh when we have escaped a deadly danger, with wholehearted relief. Such is the laughter in the last act of *The Merchant of Venice,* after the machinations of Shylock have been deferred by the ingenuity of a girl. Tartuffe is always sinister, but even before we have discovered the way out of his net we laugh at the skill with which he spreads it. And the comic laughter is in no way dependent upon the happy outcome of the play. It is only by an unworthy trick that the play *Les Femmes Savantes* ends as we would wish; but we never for a moment forget to laugh at the ominous pedantry of the learned ladies. And this willingness to accept a catastrophe in comedy is due precisely to the presence of comic irony—the fusing of the sinister with the grotesque and the heightening of the comic effect.

It is the comic idea that makes great comedy, and not the plot and its outcome. With the presence of irony the comic idea is discovered to be richer and larger in scope; and is accepted as more convincingly true. With this our interest suddenly shifts from the plot or intrigue and the cleverness with which the author manages them, to the more important question of life and the attitudes with which to meet even its unpleasantness. It is surprising how slight the plots are in the greatest comedies—*The Tempest, The Misanthrope, The Knights, The Acharnians.* One can forget the fate of the hero, and the machinery of the story, such as it is; but one can never forget the idea that lies behind and gives life to the comic situation, for it is a thing out of which philosophies are made.

Whenever men "wax out of proportion. . . whenever they offend sound reason and fair justice," to quote Meredith, "are false in humility or mired in conceit, individually or in bulk—the spirit overhead will look humanely malign and cast an oblique light on them, followed by volleys of silvery laughter. This is the Comic Spirit." True; only in the greatest comedy there are also tears in the laughter. So it is also with Goldoni, the Italian Molière, but at a distance. He has none of the profound sense of all humanity of his master; seldom does he see beyond the individ-

uals that compose his society to the heart of humanity itself. The best known of his comedies are *Il Cavaliere e la Dama, La Buona Moglie, La Bottega del Caffè, La Locandiera.* In these the commonplace things of life are shown us—goodness of heart against a greedy and unscrupulous world, at times suggesting the thing that with Masefield gives us the *Tragedy of Nan.* And though the ends of his plays are happy, it is a happiness always that is fortunately rescued from the brink of despair—a perilous happiness; and the laughter of relief always has a note of fear. There is something of the larger irony always present in comedy, an irony not essentially different from the comic irony in the highest tragedy.

There is something more, then, in comedy than the mere castigation of vice. "Flogging castigates by a blow," writes Gregory, "and the gaol castigates by confining freedom, but laughter castigates by its supercilious implication that the victim is worth neither a blow nor the trouble of confining." It castigates, but in the smile that confesses that the victim is neither worth a blow nor the trouble of confining, it has made a confession that at times is almost equivalent to the "great renunciation."

And this is true of Shaw. His revolt against the things society lives by is so catholic that he leaves little for us to prize or to grow enthusiastic about. His *Man and Superman* is a vain search for new social values; his *Cæsar and Cleopatra,* a thrust at the historical perspective; his *Androcles and the Lion,* a revolt against the romance of the Christian martyr. All this is most excellent. Our pet fads and enthusiasms are always game in season. But is it not also true that Shaw sometimes has in him a hint of the character of an Alceste? For Alceste lacked humor, the one thing that could have made life endurable. "If a sense of humor," I am again quoting Gregory, "is the fixed associate of wisdom and implies common sense, an accusation of deficiency in humor is an imputation of folly." For with humor comes the large attitude of humility. "Genuine humor," wrote Landor, "and true wit require a sound and capacious mind, which is always a grave one."

Further, even in its lightest aspects the comic spirit is always a means of social relief, as Socrates once said, "a jest may sometimes pleasantly interrupt earnest." The mere relaxation of amusement is itself a valuable means of social recreation, as Aristotle defines it in his *Ethics*. And this is true even of the gayest and lightest of comedies. Or to get at it from the angle of the psychologist, "The sense of the ludicrous does more exclusively for the mind what laughs do more exclusively for the body." Life at best is a serious business and a narrowing to most of us; the social relaxation of sheer relief afforded by comedy must have been and will always be biologically and sociologically of the utmost value in preserving at a level of efficiency the will to live. This is a purely utilitarian value, to be put into the same category with the utilitarian value of companionship and food; yet it is by such things that humanity preserves itself against the days of stress. Even farce and the gross humor of Rabelais and the absurdities of *Maître Pathelin* are a protest against a social over-refinement, and thus an exercise of certain natural tendencies that cannot be quite forgotten without some compensating loss.

One wishes to avoid exaggeration, but it seems safe to say that there are times, and not infrequently, when the spirit of comedy makes life endurable. The tragedies of life, because they are serious, we can bear with fortitude, but they are for most of us rare, and to some they never come. But the lesser bafflements, the grotesque inconsistencies, the irritating irrelevancies—these are the things that though individually they may be of no power to quell, in the aggregate are like sand in one's shoes, a sliver under the skin, a cinder in the eye. The treachery of a friend, hypocrisy in high places, deceit and double dealing, lofty pretension and humble power, ugliness in character and in act—these things are as common in life as they are painful to meet. Without the power to see the grotesqueness, the incongruity, the ludicrousness, and even the ridiculousness of these, life would be like having to do without the protection of the skin. It is comic laughter that wipes the slate clean and refreshes the soul.

This, I think, is what Emerson, the man who more than once has been accused of lacking humor, meant when he wrote:

> Hence the best of all jokes is the sympathetic contemplation of things by the understanding from the philosopher's point of view. There is no joke so true and deep in actual life as when some pure idealist goes up and down among the institutions of society, attended by a man who knows the world, and who, sympathizing with the philosopher's scrutiny, sympathizes also with the confusion and indignation of the detected skulking institutions. His perception of disparity, his eye wandering perpetually from the rule to the crooked, lying, thieving fact, makes the eyes run over with laughter.

It is also the thing that Shaw meant when he wrote that he wished to see how many of his spectators were in "a melting mood."

A Don Quixote and a Sancho Panza in real life would doubtless be uncomfortable persons to have as bedfellows; the one a reforming idealist with outgrown weapons, a sway-backed nag, and a cracked brain, going up and down the world preaching doctrines that practical men can't live by, and practicing virtues that the open-eyed would call folly. He wished to be a savior, but to a commonplace world he looked a fool on horseback. And his squire was no better—a rogue in his speech, a glutton in his appetites, and a coward in his heart. But who can resist the charm of Cervantes' subtle humor? The charm is irresistible even as we laugh at the first of the knight's misadventures, and we never waver in our allegiance. Comedy makes even the disagreeable attractive. It gives us a philosophy of life that is sane even in a world of insanities. It is the great compensation. It will overcome even fear, and make unjust power tremble. The Athenian, in the days of Aristophanes, discovered in it a mighty weapon for controlling the tyrant and the demagogue by unmasking his pretensions and making his power ridiculous. Injustice is the thing man can endure with the least forbearance, but laugh at your tormentor, and even injustice becomes a comic episode.

Chapter XIV

THE LYRIC AND THE ESSAY

THE PERSONAL NOTE—AN OLD TRADITION—MODERN POPULARITY—EFFORTS AT A DEFINITION OF LYRIC POETRY—DIFFICULTIES—"PURE" POETRY—EMOTIONAL VALUES—INTELLECTUAL VALUES—OBJECTIVE AND SUBJECTIVE—SINGING QUALITY—THE PERSONAL EQUATION—CONTRAST WITH EPIC AND DRAMATIC POETRY—RANGE OF THE LYRIC EXPERIENCE—SPECIAL FORMS—THE ODE—THE ELEGY—VALUE OF THE LYRIC—THE ROMANTIC EXCESS—EFFECT OF DEMOCRACY—THE ESSAY—ITS SCOPE—THE IMPERSONAL ESSAY—THE ESSAYIST'S PERSONALITY—ITS VALUE—THE AUTHOR—EFFECT OF JOURNALISM.

READER, loe here a well-meaning Booke. It doth at the first entrance forewarn thee, that in contriving the same, I have proposed unto myself no other than a familiar and private end: I have no respect or consideration at all, either to thy service, or to my glory. . . . I desire therein to be delineated in mine owne genuine, simple and ordinary fashion, without contention, art or study; for it is myself I pourtray. Thus, gentle Reader, myself am the groundwork of my booke. It is then no reason thou shouldst employ thy time about so frivolous and vaine a Subject. Therefore farewell.[1]

Such is the warning at the beginning of the exquisitely illuminating series of Montaigne's personal *Essays*. Yet thousands have found in his portrayal much that is common to all humanity. I would like to place beside it these lines from Emanuel von Geibel, the German lyric poet:

> Das ist des Lyrikers Kunst, aussprechen was allen gemein ist,
> Wie er's im tiefsten Gemüth neu und besonders erschuf;

[1] Florio tr. This translation, though not always accurate, and at times obscure for modern readers, preserves best the quaint aroma of the French original.

Oder dem Eigensten auch solch allverständlich Gepräge
Leihn, dass jeglicher drin staunend sich selber erkennt.[1]

Both of these writers may have only a partial view of the scope of the possibilities of the essay or the lyric; but each lays his finger on one quality that is common to both. Both forms seem essentially personal in origin; both in the main record experiences with a certain intimate value; and both invite the reader to participate, not as spectator or distant auditor, but as sympathetic friend.

Again, there is nothing unique in these two so-called literary types. They are not restricted to any periods of literature nor to any favored races. If we may hazard a guess, the origins of poetry lie in the earliest lyrics; and so soon as man began to write prose, there were doubtless discoverable traces of those personal adventures in ideas, those "leisurely and discursive" ramblings about men and manners that we call the essay. Fashion may change their subject matter and dictate a larger or a lesser popularity, or it may even ignore their existence, but they have always been a *"tendance de l'esprit humain."*

For though neither is mentioned by Aristotle, and early criticism gives them hardly a word, one finds them both fully grown and well able to take care of themselves long before modern European literature began to take on form. Of lyric poetry it is hardly necessary to speak; the Psalms and chants of the Prophets are too obvious a reminder of its power in Hebrew literature. Greek and Latin literature have the now almost unrivaled lyrics of Pindar, Anacreon, Sappho, Simonides, Horace, and Catullus—to name only a few. And though it is not quite so obvious, yet in these same literatures one can read also the essayist's familiar hand. Plato in his dialogues gives more than one hint of an

[1] I venture a weak translation:

Such is the lyricist's art, to portray
what's common to all,
But new and wondrously wrought in the
depths of a poet's soul;
Or on what's unique in his own, a stamp
that is common to all
To fix, that each one gazing thereon
may know the face for his own.

incipient essay; the Greek historians pause now and then to gossip; the satirist, Lucian, is at times a confirmed essayist, even when he handles the essay in the form of a dialogue. Plutarch's *Moral Essays* are not all treatises but drop into the familiar style. So do Cicero's *Letters,* more easily than his formal essays. But, best of all, it was the Emperor Marcus Aurelius, and the indigent philosopher Epictetus, who left us in the *Meditations* and the *Moral Discourses,* and above all in the brief sketches of the *Enchiridion,*[1] very genuine essays. What follows is from the last:

> As in a voyage, when the ship is at anchor, if you go on shore to get water you may amuse yourself with picking up a shell-fish, or an onion, in your way, but your thoughts ought to be bent towards the ship, and perpetually attentive lest the captain should call, and then you must leave all these things, that you may not be thrown into the vessel, bound neck and heels like a sheep: thus likewise in life, if, instead of an onion or a shell-fish, such a thing as a wife or a child be granted you, there is no objection; but if the captain calls, run to the ship, leave all these things, regard none of them. But if you are old, never go far from the ship: lest, when you are called, you should be unable to come in time.[2]

In the literature of the past century and a half, however—since the days of Rousseau, to be exact—these two forms of literature have tended to absorb into themselves more and more of the best efforts of the best writers. I think it would be quite safe to say that the loss of lyric poetry to Greek and Latin literature, great as the loss might be, would still leave us the total genius of both cultures relatively unimpaired. Greek epic poetry and the drama, and the strength of Greek prose, the whole of what is left of the Greek art of sculpture and architecture, and Greek thought, would yet leave Greek culture for what it is. The Greek lyric and Greek music add nothing that is uniquely significant. The same is more emphatically true for the Latin culture. The lyric, as we have it, was always an immigrant in Rome, and never quite fully naturalized. It is hardly necessary to add that the essay is for

[1] The *Moral Discourses* and the *Enchiridion* are lectures or sayings of the philosopher Epictetus reported by his admirer Arrian.
[2] Carter tr.

both too meager a form to have affected literature; indeed, it is only as we search curiously that we discover its presence. Aristotle in not mentioning these forms was guilty of no large oversight.

Even as late as Shakespeare or Milton, the lyric was a yet subordinate *genre;* this in spite of the burst of lyric poetry on both sides of the English Channel in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Moreover, in spite of Montaigne and Bacon, the essayists were only occasional writers, whose work, as Montaigne protested in his preface, was only for those who liked that sort of thing. Fine as they are, one looks in vain in the *Sonnets* for the secret of *Lear* or *Hamlet;* and the excellence of *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* and even *Lycidas* fail to reveal the genius of the *Paradise Lost* or *Samson.* And Bacon, at least for his time, was the projector of the *Novum Organum,* not the author of the pragmatic *Essays.*

But the past century and a half has told a quite different story. The essay has become the serious pastime of the highest ability. English literature tells the story of Landor, Hazlitt, De Quincey, Lamb, and of a long series of writers down to our time who have made of it a mode of communication second only in value to the prose novel. The same is true in the other European literatures and also in America. The lyric too has gradually, but even more effectively, made good its place, not only as the rival of the other forms of poetry, but as almost the sole form that meets the popular favor. In spite of the longer poems of Wordsworth and Shelley, Tennyson and Browning, and in our time of Masefield and Robinson, it is the lyric that seems to have preëmpted the field. More than this, one can not catch more than the most fleeting glimpse of Shakespeare and Milton in their lyrics; but Goethe, Hebbel, Victor Hugo, George Meredith, and Thomas Hardy have spoken so intimately in theirs, that were the longer works lost, we should still have no unworthy idea of the author's true greatness.

It is not a coincidence that the history of the lyric and the essay should thus have so much in common. It should not surprise us

also that a philosopher today, like Keyserling, should write in the form of the essay, instead of the treatise; or that an essentially dramatic poet like Browning or Masefield should turn to the lyric. For there is a closer relationship between these two *genres* than appears on the surface. They are for prose and poetry respectively, an essentially personal and intimate manner of looking at things. They differ only as prose and poetry differ; in all else they have a long tradition in common.

Notwithstanding the general silence of the older criticism on the subject of the lyric—we shall take up the discussion of the essay later—there are abundant signs that the poets at least took it very seriously. Sidney in the *Defense of Poesy* grows quite enthusiastic: It is the lyric poet, "who giveth praise, the reward of virtue to virtuous acts; who giveth moral precepts and natural problems; who sometimes raiseth up his voice to the height of the heavens, in singing the lauds of immortal God." And though Sidney himself, in his *Astrophel and Stella,* and his predecessors were not always careful to limit their singing to moral and divine hymns, but did sometimes let their work smack something of the earth, and forgot in a song addressed to a mistress their duty to their "immortal God," it is good to know that they felt this form of poetry to be noble in parentage and not a "step-child" of the poetic art. Since their time, and in the newer criticism, the claims of this oldest and youngest child of the Muses have more than been vindicated.[1]

It is difficult to discover a definition of the lyric, and for obvious reasons, for there are at least three quite distinct points of view for its study. One may be interested in it as a subjective experience and try to formulate a definition that will endeavor to describe it as we have attempted in the chapters above to describe tragedy and comedy. The only trouble with such an approach is the amazing range of the lyric experience. Or, again, one may approach it quite objectively and attempt some sort of a

[1] See Gayley and Scott, *Methods and Materials of Literary Criticism,* the volume dealing with lyric, epic, and allied forms of poetry. There are over four hundred pages of analysis and bibliography. See also the formidable work of R. M. Werner, *Lyrik und Lyriker* and, more recently, Heinz Werner, *Die Ursprünge der Lyrik,* each with a bibliography before which one stands aghast.

classification of lyrics according to subject matter; and we shall have such things as nature lyrics, lyrics of sentiment, patriotic lyrics, and the rest of the list one used to find in an *"omnium gatherum"* like Bryant's *Library of Poetry and Song,* or the old family albums. But somehow one never feels quite safe with such a description; there is always the haunting fear that something will later reproach one for having been left out. A critic should be catholic in such matters. Finally, one might easily do what most books on the subject do, describe merely on the basis of external form and go into matters of rhythm, meter, verse forms, and the various metrical structures like the ode, ballade, rondeau, sonnet, and the like. This at least seems to be scientifically accurate, and has the advantage of dodging the previous question—what is a lyric.

But it is this previous question that is of interest now. Nietzsche finds the lyric manner a direct contrast to the epic:

> The pictures of the lyrist are nothing but his very self and, as it were, only different projections of himself, by force of which he, as the moving center of this world, may say "I"; only of course this self is not the same as that of the waking, empirically real man, but the only truly existent and eternal self resting at the basis of things, and with the help of whose images, the lyric genius can penetrate to this very basis.

I am afraid this definition, attractive as all metaphysical definitions appear at first sight, has a bit of the fog of mysticism that hides the sharp outlines of fact. If we accept it along with its philosophy, we should have to make also some readjustments in our use of the word; for we should be compelled to reject as lyrics all of Browning's "dramatic lyrics" and even such things as Wordsworth's *Michael;* and this high-handed manner is disconcerting. I have taken Nietzsche's as the type of the metaphysical definition—there are many others, those of Kant, von Schelling, Hegel, Schopenhauer, all men who were rather more interested in a good schematic definition than in the concrete

thing we call poetry. It is good to know them, but it is also wise when with them to be cautious.

Professor Gayley's definition is good so far as it goes, and perhaps in the end we shall find none better: the lyric is distinguished from other types of poetry as an "utterance of personal subjectivity, emotive and imaginative." Only it is a little hard to think of some as being pure personal subjectivity. Again, Browning's "dramatic lyrics" hardly have a character that in this respect unites them with Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey* or Tennyson's *Crossing the Bar*. Palgrave may help. For him lyrics "turn on some single thought, feeling, or situation," characterized "by brevity, the coloring of human passion," and a "rapidity of movement." But brevity is a purely relative term. Poe's *Ulalume* is brief, but the whole manner of, let us say, Shelley's *Adonais* is anything but brief, nor is its matter; and what shall we call his *Epipsychidion?* I take Carriere's definition only because it and ones like it have been frequently commended: "The lyric poet stands in the present and lends eternity to the moment." The trouble with this is that, like some lyric poems, it is emotively potent, but there is a plentiful lack of intelligent comment. If it means anything at all, it is equally applicable to any form of literature. Finally, there is the terse definition by the critic Brunetière: "Lyric poetry is the expression of the personal feelings of the poet translated into rhythms analogous to the nature of his emotion." And this brings us back to where we started—the "personal subjectivity."

The obvious fact that any poetic experience is personal and subjective has led more than one critic to deny that there is anything peculiar *in* the lyric to distinguish it from the other types of poetry, except that, as Gosse puts it, the "pure" lyric is a bit nearer to "pure poetry." He calls it the "essence of poetry." It was, however, the philosopher and æsthetic critic Croce who gave this theory of the lyric its large acceptance today. And in referring to him I can't do better than to quote his disciple, Mr. Spingarn. To him the term lyric represents "the free expressiveness of art. All art is lyrical—the *Divine Comedy, King Lear,* Rodin's

'Thinker,' the Parthenon, a Corot landscape, a Bach fugue, or Isadora Duncan's dancing, as much as the songs of Heine or Shelley." There is only one trouble with the "free expressiveness" of this definition; like a coin whose superscription has been rubbed off, it gives us no indication of its value. And in this connection we happen not to be talking of Isadora Duncan's dancing, "lyric" as that was. But notwithstanding the large evasiveness of this definition there is something to be said for the lyric and the theory of "pure poetry."

Professor Woodberry offers a definition of the lyric that has a not distant relationship to the expressionist offering:

> It remains true, however, that the substance of the lyric, the essential experience which it contains, is the emotion, and not the image set forth in words which indeed exists only to suggest or discharge the emotion. . . . Lyrics . . . are symbols of universal emotion which is conveyed or roused by the imagery. . . . The lyric defines and releases this vague emotion which is forever arising in experience; this is its function, its ground of being in art, its use to the world.

"Symbols of universal emotion roused by imagery"—the phrase is convincing so long as we confine our attention to the lyrics of the romantic movement and the Elizabethans; but if we stray far from this well-trod ground we begin to experience some difficulty. The emotion is not at all the necessary chief ingredient in many of Dante's best lyrics. Take this one that his friend Casella sang for the assembled spirits in Purgatory:

Amor, che nella mente mi ragiona.

The whole ode, or *canzone,* may be found at the beginning of the third treatise of the *Convivio.* I will take only one brief movement out of the whole pattern. The following translation, unrhymed and in a freer rhythm, does rank injustice to the exquisite grace of the original:

> Sees never the sun, circling this earth,
> A thing so gentle as in that hour when
> His rays light the land where sojourneth
> The Lady, of whom Love constrains me to speak.

Each supernal intelligence gazes upon her;
And those folk who here below are enamored,
Ever find in her the haven of their thought,
When Love makes them to know his peace.[1]

To be sure, there is a strong emotional undercurrent to the peace of these lines, a peace that Dante advisedly feels at the very beginning of the arduous ascent of the Mount of Purgatory, upon whose heights is to be found the Earthly Paradise, the true abode of Peace. But this emotional undercurrent is for the larger purpose of the poem.

She it is who humbleth each one perverse.
Of her was He thinking when He set in motion the world.

After the poem the poet takes a complete treatise to expound the inner meaning of its symbolism. Nor are we quite fair to Dante to read the poem without some effort at the intellectual dexterity his reading of his own poem requests. Or, to put it in another way, Dante, and with him his time, often looked at lyric poetry with a far different prejudice from ours. We accept it usually as an emotive stimulant; the Middle Ages often took it as an adventure in a species of emotional higher dialectics. In other words, Dante uses the lyric emotion to stimulate thought and to exercise his intellectual subtlety.

But at a far later date than Dante there was a lyrical school that found its interest in poetry in something quite different from its purely emotional quality, and used imagery, like Dante, for different effects—the so-called "Metaphysical Poets." Let us take as an illustration these lines from Abraham Cowley; the poem is one of the more obvious of its class:

Hope, whose weak *Being* ruin'd is,
Alike if it *succeed,* and if it *miss;*
Whom *Good* or *Ill* does equally confound,
And both the *Horns* of *Fates Dilemma* wound,
Vain *shadow!* which dost vanish quite,

[1] Reprinted by permission from Dante's *Convivio* in the Temple Classics, published by E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., New York.

Both at full *Noon,* and perfect *Night!*
The Stars have not a *possibility*
Of blessing Thee;
If things then from their *End* we happy call,
'Tis *Hope* is the most *Hopeless* thing of all.

Hope, thou bold *Taster* of Delight
Who whilst thou shouldst but *tast, devour'st* it quite!
Thou bringst us an *Estate,* yet leav'st us *Poor,*
By clogging it with *Legacies* before!
The *Joys* which we *entire* should wed,
Come *deflowr'd Virgins* to our bed;
Good fortunes without gain imported be,
Such mighty *Custom's* paid to Thee.
For *Joy,* like *Wine,* kept close does better tast;
If it take air before, its spirits wast.

Hope, Fortunes cheating *Lottery!*
Where for one *prize* an hundred *blanks* there be;
Fond *Archer, Hope,* who tak'st thy aim so far,
That still or *short,* or *wide* thine arrows are!
Thin, empty *Cloud,* which th' eye deceives
With shapes that our own *Fancy* gives!
A *Cloud,* which gilt and painted now appears,
But must drop presently in *tears!*
When thy false beams o'er *Reasons* light prevail,
By *Ignes fatui* for *North-Stars* we sail.

Brother of *Fear,* more gaily clad!
The *merr'ier Fool* o' th' two, yet quite as *Mad:*
Sire of *Repentance, Child* of fond *Desire!*
That blow'st the *Chymicks,* and the *Lovers* fire!
Leading them still insensibly on
By the strange *witchcraft* of *Anon!*
By *Thee* the one does changing *Nature* through
Her endless *Labyrinths* pursue,
And th' other chases *Woman,* whilst She goes
More ways and turns than *hunted Nature* know

The whole significance of this—and the poem is far from insignificant—is in the play of wit, in the brilliant intellectual fireworks.

'Tis Hope is the most Hopeless thing of all.

The emotion is the spray of scattered sparks. But lyric poetry of this type is not at all uncommon. French lyric poetry of the seventeenth century is full of it. It is repeatedly seen even in the nineteenth century. It has been described by T. S. Eliot as an effort, and a successful one, to turn one's erudition into poetry. It is hard to do, and hard to read; but for those who can read, an extremely worth-while exercise.

For this reason it seems appropriate to protest in season against the modern tendency to limit the range of lyrics to those that set out to exploit the emotion. It was Wordsworth who gave this modern attitude its huge ascendency, when he described "all good poetry" as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." Yet even he added that "poems to which any value can be attached were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who, being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply." But this last caution some of our critics and also, I fear, some of our poets seem to have forgotten.

In any case, we have discovered that it is impossible to separate the feelings, impulses, emotions accompanying an experience from the thought, as though each originated in a separate compartment of the brain and combined in the experience as tributaries unite to form a river. For this reason I think it is unprofitable to follow a generalization I saw some time ago which supplied, as it were, a variety of emotional barometer for the lyric. Its method was seemingly quite convincing. If the emotions be deep, the objective situation that is the assumed theme of the lyric is ignored; if the emotion be less potent, the situation and the inner image will both appear; but if the emotion be only slightly stirred, the situation or the object will have the chief

value. If we use this test we get curious results. In Shelley's *To the Moon:*

> Art thou pale for weariness
> Of climbing heaven and gazing on the earth,
> Wandering companionless
> Among the stars that have a different birth,
> And ever changing, like a joyless eye
> That finds no object worth its constancy ?

The internal imagery, "pale for weariness," "joyless eye," is the whole story, and the poem undoubtedly has a strong emotional reaction. Against this we could place Keats' *Ode to a Grecian Urn,* which begins with the figures on the urn, wanders to suggested imagery and back again. It is the poet's musing as he gazes on the quietness of the immortality of art:

> O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede
> Of marble men and maidens overwrought,
> With forest branches and the trodden weed;
> Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought
> As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!
> When old age shall this generation waste,
> Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
> Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,
> "Beauty is truth, truth beauty,"—that is all
> Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

Put beside these the Scottish ballad of *The Twa Corbies.*

> As I was walking all alane
> I heard twa corbies making a mane:
> The tane unto the tither did say,
> "Whar sall we gang and dine the day?"
>
> "—In behint yon auld fail dyke
> I wot there lies a new-slain knight;
> And naebody kens that he lies there
> But his hawk, his hound, and his lady fair.

"His hound is to the hunting gane,
His hawk to fetch the wild-fowl hame,
His lady's ta'en anither mate,
So we may mak our dinner sweet.

"Ye'll sit on his white hause-bane,
And I'll pike out his bonny blue e'en:
Wi' ae lock o' his gowden hair
We'll theek our nest when it grows bare.

"Mony a one for him maks mane,
But nane sall ken whar he is gane:
O'er his white banes, when they are bare,
The wind sall blaw for evermair."

In this last there is not one word of the so-called "inner imagery." The whole is purely objective, and the poet never obtrudes himself after the first line. But it would be difficult to tell in which of the three poems the emotions rise to larger overflow. And we are forced back to the unanswerable question—what is it in a poem or a poetic experience that rouses the emotive impulses? All we can say is that they are the issues of life and its meaning, as they have been stored for us in past experience, and which the poet by the magic of the new is able to touch until they reverberate.

Nor do we get much help from a definition that, looking to its origins, insists upon the singing quality of the lyric. The old lyric doubtless was closely associated with music; even as late as the age of the Elizabethans the close connection between the lyric and song was preserved. The old terms "sonnet," *"canzone,"* and the like, still preserve the tradition. Hence critics today insist upon "the general melody that renders the lyric singable," and Wordsworth speaks of it as "an animated or impassioned recitation," or someone calls it the "inner music of the feelings," whatever this may mean.

If by this is meant the subtle adaptation of the rhythms, meter, and the rhymes to the tone of the experience, it in no way distinguishes lyric poetry from other forms of verse.[1] Their

[1] See Chapter V.

symbolic effect, and the association by tradition of certain emotive values to certain rhythmic patterns—for example, the ballade (a dance meter originally), the sonnet, the triolet, rondeau, sestina, villanelle—this also we have no difficulty in experiencing. Nor can we forget the rather close connection between all poetry and music, a connection that becomes still closer with certain varieties of the lyric. But all lyrics do not have a singing quality. The passages of the Hebrew prophets, for example, some of them, even in a distant translation, still preserve their rich lyric character, and one that does not suggest the offices of the chant to bring out their poetic quality. No one would dream of setting Wordsworth's *Ode on Intimations* to music, or Gray's *Progress of Poetry,* or some of Cowley's odes. Whitman in his *Drum Taps* is at his very high best; but he is not remotely singable, much as he talks of himself as a singer:

A sight in camp in the day-break grey and dim,
As from my tent I emerge so early, sleepless,
As slow I walk in the cool fresh air, the path near by the hospital tent,
Three forms I see on stretchers lying, brought out there, untended lying,
Over each the blanket spread, ample brownish woollen blanket,
Grey and heavy blanket, folding, covering all.
Curious, I halt, and silent stand;
Then with light fingers I from the face of the nearest, the first, just lift the blanket:
Who are you, elderly man so gaunt and grim, with well-grey'd hair, and flesh all sunken about the eyes?
Who are you, my dear comrade?

Then to the second I step—And who are you, my child and darling?
Who are you, sweet boy, with cheeks yet blooming?

Then to the third—a face nor child, nor old, very calm, as of beautiful yellow-white ivory;
Young man, I think I know you—I think this face of yours is the face of Christ himself;
Dead and divine, and brother of all, and here again he lies.

The least we can say is that in the lyric certain meters and rhythms and certain verse forms suggest the song, and are better for the regular musical cadences they rouse. But that there are other forms that have a larger freedom and a more complex measure, we cannot deny; forms which, though having a musical quality common to all poetry, might even be seriously incommoded if they were translated into lyrical singing.

I think we have gone far enough in search for a definition of the meaning of the much-used and much-abused term "lyric mood," and in each direction we seem to discover a paradox. Beyond accepting, and so far without question, the mere fact that the lyric is personal—and what poetry in its way is not personal? —we have been engaged in showing the large complexity and the exceeding multifariousness of the whole problem. It is time that we discover what is implied in this reservation that the lyric is, more than any other poetic form, intimately personal in its attitude.

This does not mean in the first place that the lyric poet is always purely subjective, that is, that the poet as it were, "identifies himself with the object described," or that he consciously or unconsciously transfers his mood to the situation or object he is concerned with, or that he is interested exclusively in his moods. In this sense Keats' *Last Sonnet* (see page 70) is largely subjective, so is Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind* (page 181). But an equal number of lyrics which are just as good may be cited where the poet is by no means subjective, and some when his mood is seemingly almost impersonal. Milton's *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* are objective, so to a lesser degree is his *Hymn on the Morning of Christ's Nativity*. So also is this exquisite little song by Edmund Waller, though it celebrates a personal experience in the manner of Horace:

> That which her slender waist confined
> Shall now my joyful temples bind;
> No monarch but would give his crown
> His arms might do what this has done.

It was my Heaven's extremest sphere,
The pale which held that lovely deer:
My joy, my grief, my hope, my love,
Did all within this circle move.

A narrow compass! and yet there
Dwelt all that's good, and all that's fair!
Give me but what this ribband bound,
Take all the rest the sun goes round!

There is a large difference between what we here mean as personal and what is usually implied by the term subjective.[1]

I think the difference between the lyric poem and the other varieties of poetry may be more or less adequately met by saying that the lyric poet lacks the large general attitude of the writer of comedy or tragedy, or the more impersonal and universal attitude of the minstrel of the epic. That is to say, his interest is more in his own private impression than in the general interest of a larger group. He is an impressionist in his habits rather than controlled by any more distant preoccupations. As a result his experiences are relatively brief and often concentrated, instead of having the longer and leisurely scope of the epic, or novel, or drama. He prefers to meet the experience with attitudes already available or quickly attained, rather than undergo a more complex experience, as the epic or dramatic poet, and reach the attitude after the experience. Wordsworth is an excellent illustration of the formation of the lyric habit. His *Prelude* tells the story of his poetic life from boyhood until his prevailing way of looking at things came to him. He had the one significant experience, and by it all his later and lesser experiences are colored. It is a clue

[1] It is difficult to maintain always the distinction between subjective and objective. To say that one is subjective at best means only that one is more interested in the state of mind accompanying an experience than in the external object. There is, of course, no such thing as pure subjectivity or pure objectivity—though the French Parnassians thought that in a larger objective reference they could find a cure for the romantic disease of subjectivity. I am reminded of a saying of Amiel: *"Les productions les plus objectives ne sont que les expressions d'une âme qui s'objective mieux que les autres, c'est-à-dire qui s'oublie davantage devant les choses, mais elles sont toujours l'expression d'une âme; de là ce qu'on appelle le style."*

Goethe has said, "Poetry of the highest type manifests itself as altogether objective; when once it withdraws itself from the external world to become subjective it begins to degenerate." He is speaking of the excesses of the Romantic School to which he once belonged. Yet at the same time there is no poet who is more personal in his lyric attitudes than Goethe.

to all his briefer lyrics. This fact will also explain why the gift of lyric poetry seems to have a shorter duration with a poet than the gift of epic or dramatic poetry, and why lyric poetry involves a heavier risk than the art of the novel. The poet's vein is more quickly exhausted.

Again I think it is true that the lyric poet is usually not interested primarily in an extraordinary adventure or an experience involving a more serious mental disturbance; or if he comes to one, he takes a particular fragment that fits his immediate impressionistic purpose. Is it not partly this that Wordsworth implies when he speaks of poetry taking "its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity"? For it is during this process of reflection that the new experience, while retaining its novelty, falls into the pattern of his poetic creed. He does precisely what an impressionistic painter does, and gives us a valuable "study" of a portrait or a landscape as it speaks to some dominant mood. I think it is this constant presence of the "personal equation," this impressionistic partiality, that is the secret and also the charm of the lyric manner. As obviously also it distinguishes the lyric from all other types of poetry. There are lyrics, and many of them, in the other varieties of poetical experience; there are lyrics in Shakespeare—not the songs—and in Dante as well as in Homer or Tasso; but one cannot with any approach to justice call the *Divine Comedy,* or the *Iliad,* or *Hamlet,* or *Jerusalem Delivered,* lyrical.

Again it seems to be generally true that the lyric depends more for the secret of its charm upon its inner structure than upon the external devices of plot or logical relationship of ideas. But this generalization must not be pushed too far, or unwarranted conclusions drawn from it. Keats' *Ode to a Nightingale* shows little sign of external structure, but his *Eve of Saint Agnes* tells a complete story; Browning's *Home Thoughts* is little more than poetic musing, but his *Rabbi Ben Ezra* handles its theme with the dexterity of a syllogism. But nevertheless both the *Eve of Saint Agnes* and the *Rabbi Ben Ezra* are as certainly in the lyric tradition as the other two poems. Something quite revolutionary would have to take place in the form and spirit of both before

they could be entered in another literary *genre*. For in both it is the author's own peculiar method of admitting the experience that gives a tone and flavor to the poems, as we may see if we contrast the one, for example, with a ballad, and the other with the philosophical speculation of Pope's *Essay on Man*. It is this personal attitude, too, that gives the poems their internal structure which has, in consequence, a more obvious importance than the logical plot.

There will be times, on the other hand, with the greatest lyrics when the depth and richness of the experience will lend the poems an impersonal character that would seem to remove them quite from the impressionism of their class and to put them above any single dominant mood. It is easy in this connection to recall the choruses in Sophocles or in Æschylus, especially the one from the *Antigone* beginning:

> Love resistless in fight, all yield at a glance of thine eye:

or the almost perfect completeness in itself of Keats' *Ode on a Grecian Urn*. In these the poet seems to have compassed the impossible, and in a brief lyric to have achieved universality, an attitude so generous in its scope that in other hands it would require an epic or a drama for its communication. The personal equation here seems to have lost its denominator, and the impressionism at a glance to have caught life in a final perspective. Paradoxes like this, and more could be discovered, make the definition of the lyric mood a dangerous adventure.

It is far more safe, and perhaps profitable, to turn from these abstract generalizations about the lyric and a search for the lyric formula, and to discuss the scope of the lyric experience. The simplest is the lyric that "remains in the outer world" throughout, rejoicing or saddened by what it there sees. Take this exquisite little song, the earliest, or one of the earliest, in all English anthologies:

> Sumer is icumen in,
> Lhude sing cuccu!
> Groweth sed, and bloweth med,

And springth the wude nu—
Sing cuccu!

Awe bleteth after lomb,
Lhouth after calve cu;
Bulluc sterteth, bucke verteth,
Murie sing cuccu!

Cuccu, cuccu, well singes thu, cuccu:
Ne swike thu naver nu;
Sing cuccu, nu, sing cuccu,
Sing cuccu, sing cuccu, nu!

Or this, which turns from nature in general to the most interesting thing in nature, by a fourteenth-century Frenchman, Eustache Deschamps. I quote a few stanzas:

Sui je, sui je, sui je belle?

Il me semble, à mon avis,
Que j'ay beau front et doulz viz
Et la bouche vermeillette;
Dittes moy se je sui belle.

J'ay vers yeulx, petits sourcis,
Le chief blont, le nez traitis,
Ront menton, blanche gorgette;
Sui je, sui je, sui je belle.

J'ay piez rondès et petiz,
Bien chaussans, et biaux habis,
Je sui gaye et foliette;
Dittes moy se je sui belle.[1]

[1] I add a limping effort at a translation of these spirited verses:

Suis-je, suis-je, suis-je belle?

Sure my mirror cannot lie,
A forehead smoothe, a winsome eye,
Cheeks tinged with a rosy light,
Dites moi si je suis belle.

Eyelids sweet o'er eyes of blue,
Saucy nose, hair brown of hue,

Again there is the reflective lyric, a large and very popular group; and again I take an early illustration—we can discover later ones without number. It is by the poor scholar François Villon; one stanza will here do for a taste:

Où est la très sage Helloïs,
Pour qui fut chastré et puis moyne
Pierre Esbaillart à Saint-Denis?
Pour son amour ot cest essoyne.
Semblablement, où est la royne
Qui commanda que Buridan
Fust gecté en ung sac en Saine?
Mais où sont les neiges d'antan! [1]

There is also the symbolical treatment of nature, where nature, or some object in nature, becomes for the moment a monument for the mood of the poet. Nature itself, as we all know, has no moods; it is orderly, following its own fixed laws, but all of us are poets in this: we insist on reading into its many manifestations as in a mirror the varied lineaments of our moods. April itself is no more joyous nor less than autumn, in nature it is only a cosmic phenomenon; but to William Watson—

April, April,
Laugh thy girlish laughter;
Then, the moment after,
Weep thy girlish tears!
April, that mine ears
Like a lover greetest,

A rounded chin, and bosom white
Suis-je, suis-je, suis-je belle?

Ankles small and slenderest feet
Trimmest shoes and garments neat,
Gay and graceful, life and light,
Dites moi si je suis belle.

[1] I give the translation by A. Lang in *Ballade of Dead Ladies:*

Where is wise Heloïse, that care
Brought on Abelard, and dismay?
All for her love he found a snare,
A maimed poor monk in orders grey;
And where's the Queen who willed to slay
Buridan, that in a sack must go
Afloat down Seine—a perilous way—
Nay, but where is the last year's snow?

If I tell thee, sweetest,
All my hopes and fears,
April, April,
Laugh thy golden laughter,
But, the moment after,
Weep thy golden tears!

On the other hand, there is the protest against nature and nature symbolisms. You see it in this well-known lyric by Drinkwater:[1]

I do not think that skies and meadows are
Moral, or that the fixture of a star
Comes of a quiet spirit, or that trees
Have wisdom in their windless silences.
Yet these are things invested in my mood
With constancy, and peace, and fortitude,
That in my troubled season I can cry
Upon the wide composure of the sky,
And envy fields, and wish that I might be
As little daunted as a star or tree.

Better, I think, is this by George Herbert, though it involves an understanding of Plato and refers directly to a passage in the *Republic:*

Who says that fictions onely and false hair
Become a verse? Is there in truth no beautie?
Is all good structure in a winding stair?
May no lines passe, except they do their dutie
Not to a true, but painted chair?

Is it no verse, except enchanted groves
And sudden arbours shadow course-spunne lines?
Must purling streams refresh a lover's loves?
Must all be vail'd, while he that reades, divines,
Catching the sense at two removes?

Shepherds are honest people; let them sing:
Riddle who list, for me, and pull for Prime:

[1] "Reciprocity" from *Poems, 1908-1919,* vol. i, by permission of, and arrangement with, Houghton Mifflin Company.

I envie no mans nightingale or spring;
Nor let them punish me with losse of ryme,
Who plainly say, *My God, My King.*

As a contrast to this protest against nature symbolisms, where "deep calleth unto deep" in the poet's soul and "knowledge answereth to knowledge," there is a range of sheer realistic lyricism. Here is something in this manner by Shakespeare:

When icicles hang by the wall,
  And Dick the shepherd blows his nail,
And Tom bears logs into the hall,
  And milk comes frozen home in pail,
When blood is nipp'd, and ways be foul,
Then nightly sings the staring owl,
    To-whit!
To-who!—a merry note,
While greasy Joan doth keel the pot.

When all aloud the wind doth blow,
  And coughing drowns the parson's saw,
And birds sit brooding in the snow,
  And Marian's nose looks red and raw,
When roasted crabs hiss in the bowl,
Then nightly sings the staring owl,
    To-whit!
To-who!—a merry note,
While greasy Joan doth keel the pot.

Modern imagist verse is chiefly concerned with developing this realistic tradition. I like this also by Drinkwater:[1]

I walked a nut-wood's gloom. And overhead
A pigeon's wing beat on the hidden boughs,
And shrews upon shy tunnelling woke thin
Late winter leaves with trickling sound. Across
My narrow path I saw the carrier ants
Burdened with little pieces of bright straw.
These things I heard and saw, with senses fine

[1] "The Wood" from *Poems, 1908-1919,* vol. ii, by permission of, and arrangement with, Houghton Mifflin Company.

For all the little traffic of the wood,
While everywhere, above me, underfoot,
And haunting every avenue of leaves,
Was mystery, unresting, taciturn.

. . . . . .

And haunting the lucidities of life
That are my daily beauty, moves a theme,
Beating along my undiscovered mind.[1]

The lyric may also tell a story, for some particular mood that the poet discovers in it. So it was with the old ballad of the *Twa Corbies*. There are many ballads old and new, that might be cited: *The Wife of Usher's Well, Sir Patrick Spens,* or Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Or it may tell a modern story, with any dominant mood, like Burns' *Tam o' Shanter* or Browning's *Incident in the French Camp*.

It may be universal, with themes like love, war, death; or it may take its theme from some single occasion, like the lyrics of Pindar, or Horace's dedication of his poems to his patron Mæcenas:

Mæcenas atavis edite regibus,
O et præsidium et dulce decus meum.[2]

It may be simple, or it may revel in its very complexity and intelligent obscurity. And for this last I may suggest this poem by John Donne:

Since I am coming to that Holy roome,
Where, with thy Quire of Saints for evermore,
I shall be made thy Musique; As I come
I tune the Instrument here at the dore,
And what I must doe then, thinke here before.

Whilst my Physitians by their love are growne
Cosmographers, and I their Mapp, who lie

[1] The last lines come back to the more familiar theme and the more familiar imagery.

[2] Mæcenas, sprung from ancient kings,
My refuge and my splendor sweet.

Flat on this bed, that by them may be showne
That this is my South-west discoverie
Per fretum febris, by these streights to die,

I joy, that in these straits, I see my West;
For, though their currants yeeld returne to none,
What shall my West hurt me? As West and East
In all flatt Maps (and I am one) are one,
So death doth touch the Resurrection.

Is the Pacifique Sea my home? Or are
The Easterne riches? Is *Ierusalem?*
Anyan, and *Magellan,* and *Gibraltare,*
All streights, and none but streights, are wayes to them,
Whether where *Iaphet* dwelt, or *Cham,* or *Sem.*

We thinke that *Paradise* and *Calvarie,*
Christs Crosse, and *Adams* tree, stood in one place;
Looke Lord, and finde both *Adams* met in me;
As the first *Adams* sweat surrounds my face,
May the last *Adams* blood my soule embrace.

So, in his purple wrapp'd receive mee Lord,
By these his thornes give me his other Crowne;
And as to others soules I preach'd thy word,
Be this my Text, my Sermon to mine owne,
Therefore that he may raise the Lord throws down.

This poem, like Herbert's on another page, is a fair test of a reader's ability to enjoy the experience of poetry which calls for some erudition. It reveals the difference, as T. S. Eliot puts it, between turning a thing into poetry and meditating upon it poetically.

But this is enough to show the range of the lyric poet's field. I have on my desk Werner's *Lyrik und Lyriker* with its methodical and exhaustive classification of lyrics by their themes, and his results lead directly into the higher mathematics, for which now I have little aptitude. Nor am I interested here in a study of the

lyric poet's art in metrics, though the literary critic who would speak of poetry should know the difference between an iambus and a trochee, and the significance of rhythms for poetry.[1] Nor somehow does this seem quite the place for a discussion of the various lyric stanzas and metrical units, though again one who is interested in poetry ought to know what a sirvente is and how it differs from a ballade or a *canzone,* or a triolet from a virelay, or a sapphic from an anacreontic. But all these are things that any handbook of poetics can deal with adequately, as they should. To mention them here would serve no purpose except that of confusion. They are part of the equipment one should bring with him before he begins the critical study of poetry.

There are, however, some so-called subdivisions of lyric poetry that deserve a word or two. Certain types of lyric experience gradually found that certain metrical contrivances were best adapted for their communication. Thus we have the ode and the elegy in particular, and the pastoral—half dialogue and half song—and the sonnet. It is hardly fair to say that the influence of all these has waned in the past century, and this would decidedly not be true of the sonnet, but the lines that divided them once have tended to break down and disappear. Their origin, except of the sonnet, was Greece, and so long as the classical tradition held sway they were cultivated in a manner suited to later needs. But with the freer romantic tradition and the revival of mediævalism in the last century, and with the larger democratic spirit in the lyric—for these old traditions were aristocratic—their significance has to some extent been lost. Whether one likes it or not, it is true that the new spirit—the thing Mr. Masefield speaks of when he says the new poets "felt that the art, which appeals only to a limited section of the world, can be but a limited and faulty art"—has for a time at least obscured their value.

There has always been the tradition of the ode. As Gosse describes it, it is "any strain of enthusiastic and exalted lyrical verse, directed to a fixed purpose, and dealing progressively with one dignified theme." It is not essentially different from the

[1] See Chapter V.

Italian *canzoni,* though with Petrarch and Dante these were largely limited to the subject of love or love used as a cloak for philosophy. The Greek odes of Pindar had a regular movement with antiphonal choral strophe and antistrophe, and a final epode —showing how at one time they had been chanted at public festivals by a trained choir. The stanzas are regular, and the two first parts correspond in metrical structure, as well as more subtly in thought and imagery. The Horatian ode has a somewhat less artificial character, without the strophe and antistrophe. The Italian *canzone* also has its parts regularly matched and anticipating subtle changes in the thought. But the very artificiality of the structure presupposes a complex and well-sustained experience, with parts carefully adjusted and coördinated, or balanced and fused. The whole is architectural. It is no child's game; you either succeed brilliantly or fail. Gray's *Progress of Poetry* is not a bad example of the artificial variety; Collins' *Ode to Simplicity* is in the less elaborate manner of Horace. Wordsworth's *Ode on Intimations of Immortality* has none of the regularity of either of the older classic types and, though it has something of the balanced cadences, is not antiphonal.

The very elaborateness of the structure and the reflective character of the thought make this a hard form of poetry for the beginner to enjoy, just as it is the form of poetry that takes more than talent to create. There is in it no room for impressionist carelessness or haste; as in a mathematical problem, each step must be faultless, or the whole is marred. Yet one that is perfect in all its parts has the repose of a Greek statue.

Against the sedate enthusiasm of the ode, the Greek invented the gentler measure of the elegy. It was by no means restricted to the expression of grief, and the quatrain of André Chenier does it scant justice:

Mais la tendre élégie et sa grâce touchante
M'ont séduit; l'élégie à la voix gémissante,
Aux ris mêlés de pleurs, aux longs cheveux épars
Belle, levant au ciel ses humides regards.

This picture of the elegy, beautiful with disheveled hair, raising streaming eyes to heaven, may justify the neo-classic idea of the function of this type; but poets have never so restricted its powers. To the ancients it had a much wider scope.

Professor Mackail has for it almost the same enthusiasm as for the Homeric hexameter.

> As in the heroic hexameter the Asiatic colonies of Greece invented the most fluent, stately, and harmonious metre for continuous narrative poetry which has yet been invented by man, so in the elegiac couplet they solved the problem, hardly a less difficult one, of a metre which would refuse nothing, which could rise to the occasion and sink with it, and be equally suited to the epitaph of a hero or the verses accompanying a birthday present, a light jest or a great moral idea, the sigh of a lover or the lament over a perished Empire.

And Coleridge allows it a wide scope for wistful reflection:

> Elegy is the form of poetry natural to the reflective mind. It *may* treat of any subject, but it must treat of no subject *for itself,* but always and exclusively with reference to the poet himself. As he will feel regret for the past or desire for the future, so sorrow and love become the principal themes of the elegy. Elegy presents everything as lost and gone, or absent and future. The elegy is the exact opposite of the Homeric epic, in which all is purely external and objective, and the poet is a mere voice. The true lyric is subjective too; but then it delights to present things as actually existing and visible, although associated with the past, or colored highly by the subject of the ode itself.

Gray's *Elegy* of course will come immediately into mind. A better series of poems to show its scope is seen in Goethe's *Roman Elegies.* One ought to contrast these with Milton's *Lycidas* and Donne's elegies. Pope in his *Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady* is rather more in the eighteenth-century tradition; contrast with this the spirit and tone of Shelley's *Adonais.* But in the best elegies there is always the note of mature and wistful reflection. And it is this disciplined reflection that today makes it unseasonable.

On the value of the lyric and especially of its place in modern literature, there should be no great difference of opinion. We may not give our fullest acceptance to Professor Saintsbury's enthusiastic generalization, though he has offered the evidence of his three volumes in *A History of English Prosody* to support his view, that it "is, after all, the central, the highest, the most natural and essential form of poetry; so that the more poetical a time is, the better will it show in lyric, and the more favorable the mechanical aids and circumstances, the better will lyrics show in them." In spite of the downrightness of this statement, the greatest poets have found themselves best in their longer poems. Dante in his *Divine Comedy* and not in the sonnets or *canzoni,* Shakespeare in his tragedies and not in his sonnets, Milton in his *Paradise Lost,* Virgil in his *Æneid* and not in the *Eclogues* or *Georgics.* Of great poets whose lyrics seem as fine as their larger works we have only one example, Goethe. This large partiality for the lyric as against the longer poem must be taken for what it is—the covert contumacy of modern impressionism.

On the other hand, there is an intimacy and a personal call about the lyric that makes it far more available than the more impersonal longer poems, and this is its secret and its only formula. The wide range also that is permitted the lyric poet—and the number of the poets—offers a multitude of selections for every possible taste; and a sign of a generous poetical age is the wide diffusion and large variety of taste. It is these facts that give its strongly lyrical flavor to the beginning of the nineteenth century, to the close of the sixteenth century, and also to the whole of the thirteenth century. But the lyrics were like the foothills and lesser places of a mountain range; they were the background out of which rose the mighty peaks, Goethe's *Faust,* Shakespeare's tragedies, and the *Divine Comedy.* If we may change the figure, the large dispersion of lyric poetry is the voice preparing the way for the larger poem, if the age is fortunate enough to produce the great poet.

Contrasted even with the closing half of the nineteenth century, it must be confessed that our age looks a bit poor and

tawdry in its lyric poetry—not that we lack many serious and devoted poets—and we see little poetry except the lyrics. But the poets seem fumbling for a theme that always escapes them. If we contrast the large activities of our time in other fields, in science and industry, in scholarship rather than in erudition, even in prose fiction, our lyric activity seems thin and uncertain and even futile.

Fortunately, I am sure, we seem to be passing from the subjectivity of the romantic era and the exploitation of sick souls. Poetry has grown tired—and the public even more—of what De Sanctis calls the "tireless explorer of oneself" (*"instancabile esploratore di se stesso"*). One tires of it even in a Petrarch:

Ed io son un di quei che 'l pianger giova.

This "joy that is found in tears," has a certain æsthetic charm perhaps, if the cause of the grief be relevant and the tears sincere. But when it becomes a fixed pose, when a horde of miniature de Mussets or little Paul Verlaines begin to "weep" on the harps of their masters, drawing tears from their own vacuity, and the world goes on, seeming to pay no attention, the feeling is not without foundation, that there is something esoteric and irrelevant in this plangent chorus.

This attitude, moreover, has become general; never perhaps in the history of the world has the gulf been wider between the poet and the public. It may be—as I suspect it is—that the new science and the new world have proved a heavier diet than the poet's imagination could digest,[1] and the poet has turned to this exploration of himself as a refuge from an uncongenial world. But whatever it has been, this tendency is passing.[2] And in its

[1] See Chapters IX and X.

[2] This octave by Edward Arlington Robinson seems relevant:

"To me the groaning of world-worshippers
Rings like a lonely music played in hell
By one with art enough to cleave the walls
Of heaven with his cadence, but without
The wisdom or the will to comprehend
The strangeness of his own perversity.
And all without the courage to deny
The profit and the pride of his defeat."

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place we have a larger objectivity, and a resolute desire to face the facts. But ours is scarcely yet a lyric art that has absorbed the intelligent activities of the age, and made itself at home in this objective world. It acts rather more as an uncomfortable or dissenting onlooker than as a participator in its new environment. It is willing to soil its fingers, indeed it often takes malicious delight in plunging its arms ruthlessly into unsavory messes, but it discovers nothing but the unsavoriness.[1] If it has lost the gleam of romance and the fabric of hope of the Victorian, it has as yet found no compensation to put in their place. It resembles at times nothing quite so much as disillusioned youth. But even this may have in it something of promise for the future.

Perhaps one abundant source of the present confusion of voices, to which there are few listeners, is discoverable in the growing demand for "democracy in art." I have already quoted Masefield. The new poet felt that the art which appeals to a learned section of the world can be but a limited and faulty art. He would have poetry learn from the "school of life instead of a school of artifice." These words suggest Tolstoy's sweeping denunciation of nineteenth-century art and its false refinements. But what Tolstoy would substitute would hardly find much favor in these days; and the author of *What Is Art?* would stand aghast before the revolt he had once led. It is the democratic tradition since Rousseau that has exaggerated the purely emotional value of art and poetry, and has tended to define the lyric as the "inner music of the feelings." It is this attitude toward art and lyric poetry that has driven one of our discriminating critics, Professor P. H. Frye, to the opposite revolt; and he, with his eye on the larger implications of poetry, denies to it a place among the arts.

What we shall see, one hopes, in the lyric poetry of the future, as in the best poetry of the past, is a more comprehensive experience, which shall not limit itself to the merely emotive implications of things, but will strive also to see the more generous in-

[1] I am thinking now of some efforts of the imagists, and also of such work as one sees frequently in Rupert Brooke.

terests and the intellectual as well as the moral background of life. Only then shall we, in Shelley's phrase, "live our knowledge," and learn the large difference between musing poetically on things and turning life into poetry. If lyric poetry has a danger—and it is very real—it is the propensity fostered since the days of Rousseau of living on the fringes of its emotions. This habit will rarely create great poetry.

Doctor Johnson, whose opinion one must respect though one is not bound to follow it, pillories the essay as an "irregular, undigested piece." Yet Doctor Johnson also wrote essays. Some were neither irregular nor undigested, yet the *Rambler* does not quite come up to the standard set by some of his predecessors. The very formality of his manner and the censorious uprightness of his matter, make the series lack the true bouquet. Yet in Boswell's quite informal *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides,* in the leisurely narrative and the desultoriness of the dialogue on subjects from tanning of leather to eating with a knife, and above all in the character of the strange visitor in places so different from his London, we have the spirit if not the form of the familiar essay. It was not a "sentimental journey," but for purposes of the essay even more significant.

The Essay is the result of a quite recognizable habit of mind. Doctor Johnson did not have it, Boswell did, so did the author of *Tristram Shandy,* and so did Rabelais, though none of them wrote what we may technically call essays. Like the lyric manner, it insists on seeing its object from the peculiarly personal point of view, on shrouding it, as it were, in a personal atmosphere. And its leisurely and discursive manner, its habit of exploiting its object rather than expounding it, is even more illuminating in the light it throws on the essayist. With most we can say, as his biographer did of Abraham Cowley, that an acquaintance with his writings was "to read and love the language of his heart." Or to quote the words of a modern, "the true essayist handles his subject like an artist and not like a professor. He takes up some pretty crystal of thought, not, as a chemist, to enlarge upon its

composition and its relation to other chemical bodies, but rather as some cunning master jeweller, lovingly polishing each facet, making it glint in the light, and setting it quaintly in some device of his own that it may attract the lovers of beautiful things and live long in their possession."

Its scope is the whole world of life and manners. "No subject is special to it, none alien from it." With Montaigne we ramble from the habits of the cannibals to speculation about death, and from how to live well that we may die well, to the foundations of religion, to the evils and good of procrastination, to nearly every conceivable subject that may interest the retired gentleman who had left the active life of politics in the intense days of the civil wars, and hoped that death would come to him while he was tending his cabbages. Bacon is not so universal; the more practical life and its more practical problems interest him, and yet he can take an encounter with "Masks and Triumphs" and "Gardens." Burton in his *Anatomy of Melancholy* has laid nearly all human nature under survey, and turned over in his scrutiny even the most personal affairs of life. La Bruyère in his *Caractères*—a very genuine book of essays—has given us glimpses of men and manners of his time and the foibles of humanity. These are a few of the essayists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—perhaps the golden age of the essay.

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were even more prolific. The essays of Addison and Steele break slightly from the old tradition, and introduce the beginnings of the modern novel with its study of character and situation. Yet both have done as well in the old manner on the old themes of "men and manners." Goldsmith's *Citizen of the World* and Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* introduce a well-meaning spirit of satire, as they show the follies of the age described in letters by supposed foreign travelers, an inversion of the manner of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels.* And Lamb and Hazlitt carry the tradition over into the next century; Lamb bringing the essay to its most winsome familiarity with his chatty discourses on roast-pig, whist, old china, and the half pathetic pictures of school-boy life at Christ's Hospital and

the charm of "Dream Children." Washington Irving brought the best of the tradition to America. But this is not the place to make a record of the world's great essayists. Histories of literature will do it far better. There is something inescapable in the true essay; of all forms of prose it comes "home to men's business and bosoms," for the intimate things are its theme.

And yet there are degrees. Contrasted with the genial openheartedness of Montaigne, Bacon is cold and calculating, for the Lord Chancellor could never quite forget his robes of office and his moral purpose. But there is a compensation—no author, English or foreign, has sprinkled his "Counsels" with such a galaxy of unforgettable lights. "Suspicions amongst thoughts are like bats amongst birds, they ever fly by twilight." "The stage is more beholding to Love, than the life of man." "Wives are young men's mistresses; companions for middle age; and old men's nurses." "God Almighty first planted a Garden." These unexpected discoveries thrill like the coruscation of the Aurora on a frosty night. And between the warm intimacy of Lamb and the cold pyrotechnics of Bacon, I am not sure that my preference would go to Elia. The Lord Chancellor reaches men's bosoms, but by a quite different road.

These are essays with the purely personal stamp. What shall we say of such as have a larger impersonality, like those of George Eliot, or Carlyle, or Macaulay—the social, historical, philosophical, or literary essay, where the theme is approached more in the spirit of conquest than of benevolent assimilation? Macaulay's *Warren Hastings* is at once historical and a plea, a piece of liberal oratory in defense of a conquered and mistreated people, and the skillful handling of evidence. His *Samuel Johnson* is at once biographical and critical, almost at times a caricature. Emerson's *Essays* are philosophical, speculative and "poems in prose," with an urgency of utterance altogether different from the disinterested intimacy of Bacon. And because the personal manner in all these differs in every particular from that of Montaigne, or Lamb, or Hazlitt, or De Quincey, are we to deny them the label?

The answer to this question is, I believe, not so difficult, though it may not satisfy those who like their classifications nicely made, and every object pigeonholed in a neat compartment. The word "essay" is after all only a convenient label; and its value is only as it describes more or less accurately these things we have learned with Faguet to call *"tendances de l'esprit humain."* It is perfectly obvious that the manner of looking at the object in an essay by Carlyle, let us say in his *Shooting Niagara,* is utterly different from the manner of Bacon or Montaigne, or of one of our moderns, let us say, Mr. Street. There is in it an ulterior purpose, didactic or prophetic—no one can question its value—which takes it quite out of the immediacy of the manner of the thing I am trying to describe. If we call it an essay—and there is no reason we should not—it is of a variety that has no poetic analogy in the lyric poem—and this is the test of truly discursive essays. Such things must be done first of all to please oneself, and not to make the world wiser or safer for ideas.

But it is precisely at this point that we may so easily go astray; the essayist seems, at least, to write chiefly to please himself, and he may appear to write, as did Montaigne or Bacon or Lamb, upon the most irrelevant matters in the world: "Old China," "Of Thumbs," "Of Seeming Wise"—I take these subjects at random. But behind it, if the essay is to have value, must be a rich and ripe philosophy of life. Its very discursiveness, the apparent inconsequence of its remarks, must be a sign that in the very mass of trifles and irrelevancies that go to make so large a part of our lives, one can seek wisdom and increase in understanding. One catches this wayfaring wisdom in what look like the chance remarks of the author of the *Ecclesiasticus* and *Ecclesiastes,* those books of short essays in the Bible. Take this, for example, from the beginning of the fourth chapter of the former:

> Wisdom exalteth her sons, and taketh hold of them that seek her. He that loveth her loveth life; and they that seek to her early shall be filled with gladness. He that holdeth her fast shall inherit glory; and

where he entereth, the Lord will bless. They that do her service shall minister to the Holy One; and them that love her the Lord doth love. He that giveth ear unto her shall judge the nations; and he that giveth heed unto her shall dwell securely. If he trust her, he shall inherit her; and his generations shall have her in possession. For at the first she will walk with him in crooked ways, and will bring fear and dread upon him, and torment him with her discipline, until she may trust his soul, and try him by her judgments: then will she return again the straight way unto him, and will gladden him, and reveal to him her secrets. If he go astray, she will forsake him, and give him over to his fall.

Beside this I should like to put this from Erasmus' *Praise of Folly;* it is "Folly" speaking:

But I restore the same man to the best and happiest part of his life. And if Men would but refrain from all commerce with Wisdom, and give up themselves to be govern'd by me, they should never know what it were to be old, but solace themselves with a perpetual youth. Do but observe our grim Philosophers that are perpetually beating their brains on knotty Subjects, and for the most part you'll find 'em grown old before they are scarce young. And whence is it, but that their continual and restless thoughts insensibly prey upon their spirits, and dry up their Radical Moisture? Whereas, on the contrary, my fat fools are as plump and round as a Westphalian Hogg, and never sensible of old age, unless perhaps, as sometimes it rarely happens, they come to be infected with Wisdom; so hard a thing it is for a man to be happy in all things. And to this purpose is that no small testimony of the Proverb, that sayes, "Folly is the onely thing that keeps Youth at a stay, and Old age afar off."

The third is from Thackeray.

To fancy all men found out and punished is bad enough; but imagine all women found out in the distinguished social circle in which you and I have the honour to move. Is it not a mercy that so many of these fair criminals remain unpunished and undiscovered? There is Mrs. Longbow, who is for ever practising, and who shoots poisoned arrows, too; when you meet her you don't call her liar, and charge her with the wickedness she has done, and is doing. There is

Mrs. Painter, who passes for a most respectable woman, and a model in society. There is no use in saying what you really know regarding her and her goings on. There is Diana Hunter—what a little haughty prude it is; and yet *we* know stories about her which are not altogether edifying. I say it is best, for the sake of the good, that the bad should not all be found out. You don't want your children to know the history of that lady in the next box, who is so handsome, and whom they admire so. Ah me! what would life be if we were all found out, and punished for all our faults? Jack Ketch would be in permanence; and then who would hang Jack Ketch?

I think it is safe to say that it is only because these essays have a very vital philosophy of life, thus concretely and whimsically set forth, that they have that other thing vital to the essay, personal charm.

I am not quite sure that Lamb was entirely just to the genius of the essayist when he wrote:

The owners of the sort of faculties I allude to have minds rather suggestive than comprehensive. They have no pretences to much clearness or precision in their ideas, or in their manner of expressing them. Their intellectual wardrobe (to confess fairly) has few whole pieces in it. They are content with fragments and scattered pieces of truth. She presents no full front to them—a feature or side-face at most. Hints and glimpses, germs and crude essays at a system, is the utmost they can pretend to. They beat up a little game peradventure—and leave it to knottier heads, more robust constitutions, to run it down. The light that lights them is not steady and polar, but mutable and shifting: waxing, and again waning. Their conversation is accordingly. They will throw out a random word in or out of season, and be content to let it pass for what it is worth. They cannot speak always as if they were on their oath—but must be understood, speaking or writing, with some abatement. They seldom wait to mature a proposition, but e'en bring it to market in the green ear. They delight to impart their defective discoveries as they arise, without waiting for their full development.

This beating "up a little game peradventure," this ability to impart "their defective discoveries," would be impossible were

it not also true that the essayists recognized game when they saw it, and they knew the value of a discovery. It is no wonder that of their conversation one may say, as Bryan Proctor said of Charles Lamb, "when he did speak his words had a flavor in them beyond any that I have heard elsewhere."

Indeed we are quite safe in saying that our greatest essayists have been among our greatest philosophers in the concrete philosophy of the value of life. It would be difficult to find a man more qualified than Montaigne, both by temperament and by experience; and he had made it a lifetime's business to know men and books, and books only as they revealed the hearts of men. His motto, *"que sçay-je,"* what do I know, is a wise scepticism learned by bitter experience, in a day when men were throwing away their lives in the bitterest of civil wars and rivalries of religious parties. He knew both sides, and because he saw good men and bad on both sides, and because wisdom means a cool head and a hatred of blind prejudice, he refrained. "Surely, man is a wonderful, vain, divers, and wavering subject; it is very hard to ground any directly-constant and uniform judgment upon him." So much had experience with men of his time and of history taught him:

> Presumption is our natural and original disease. The most wretched and frail of all creatures is man, and withal the proudest. He feels and sees himself lodged here in the dirt and filth of the world, nailed and rivetted to the worst and deadest part of the universe, in the lowest story of the house, and most remote from the heavenly arch, with animals of the worst condition of the three, and yet in his imagination will be placing himself above the circle of the moon, and bringing heaven under his feet.

But this does not keep him depressed. Montaigne is no cynic; he will limit his activities only to such things as are within the compass of human nature, like the skillful navigator who trims his sail in a tempest. He will content himself with a philosophy "that teaches him to know himself, and how both well to die and well to live. Among the liberal sciences, let us begin with

that which makes us free." "The most manifest sign of wisdom is a continual cheerfulness."

Here is a philosophy that reveals to us a personality and its value, a personality that is the author's and a value that is for the reader. It is precisely here that we have the closest analogy between the lyric and the essay. Both give us those intimate and concrete revelations. The large figure of the epic or the dramatic poet to most readers is rarely more than a hazy shadow behind the vivid crystals of his imagination. But here it is the author himself that stands before us in the person of his own experiences and their comment. Sir Thomas Browne, the quiet physician of the provincial city of Norfolk, quiet, studious, and methodical, how clearly we see him in the passages about himself he has left us:

> I thank God, amongst those millions of Vices I do inherit and hold from Adam, I have escaped one, and that a mortal enemy to Charity, the first and father-sin, not onely of man, but of the devil, Pride; a vice whose name is comprehended in a Monosyllable, but in its nature not circumscribed with a World. I have escaped it in a condition that can hardly avoid it. Those petty acquisitions and reputed perfections that advance and elevate the conceits of other men, add no feathers unto mine. I have seen a Grammarian towr and plume himself over a single line in Horace, and shew more pride in the construction of one Ode, than the Author in the composure of the whole book. For my own part, besides the *Jargon* and *Patois* of several Provinces, I understand no less than six Languages; yet I protest I have no higher conceit of myself, than had our Fathers before the confusion of Babel, when there was but one Language in the World, and none to boast himself either Linguist or Critick.

Such persons are well worth knowing.

There has been a tendency, a very noticeable one, since Rousseau, for the essay to exploit, not the rich personality for a valuable philosophy of life, but the slightly bizarre or eccentric for the sake of its whimsical charm. At its best we see this habit in Charles Lamb, or De Quincey, with the pictures of Christ's Hospital or the pains of opium. At its worst it runs into the

extravagant meanderings of sheer irrelevance. Here, as the intellectual value of the essay decreases in favor of the purely sensational, we pass into what may be called the vice of the essayist's art. All personal exploitation is not equally valuable, and all self-revelation not equally edifying. I am reminded of a saying of Lowell's on Rousseau's *Confessions*. He bared his bosom asking for sympathy, but we can see only the dirty linen. Whether this is true of Rousseau or not is beside the question here; but it is true of some of his later followers. Dirty linen may be a necessary by-product of modern living, but there are places where it need not be displayed.

And this tendency to take away from the essay its old preoccupation with a concrete philosophy of life has been stimulated by the all-invading habits of modern journalism. Not only has the effect been a direct drawing off of the essayists' powers to things that are temporarily "good stories," a process regretted by the late Richard Middleton:

> The fact is, that essays are bad journalism in the literal sense of that elastic word, because they take no count of time, while it is the function of journalism to tear the heart out of today. A good essay should start and end in a moment as long as eternity; it should have the apparent aimlessness of life, and, like life, it should have its secret purpose. Perhaps the perfect essay would take a lifetime to write and a lifetime to comprehend; but, in their essence, essays . . . ignore time and negate it. They cannot be read in railway trains by travellers who intend to get out at a certain station, for the mere thought of a settled destination will prevent the reader from achieving the proper leisurely frame of mind. Nor can they be written for a livelihood, for a man who sits down to write an essay should be careless as to whether his task shall ever be finished or not.[1]

But the habit has gone farther, affecting the very matter of the essay itself. Instead of being leisurely discourses upon men and manners, they have become snapshots of significant situations whose value is in their dramatic rather than in their reflective character. One wishes, not once, that such authors had for-

[1] From *Monologues*, by permission of Mitchell Kennerley.

gotten their readers and gone ahead with Montaigne's reservation—"Had my intention been to seek the world's favor, I should . . ." But this world's favor the habit of journalism will never allow us to forget. The fault is seen in the essays of Mr. Chesterton. He has the humor and the intimacy of the true essayist; but his essays are not quite a series of amiable discourses after the coffee at a dinner, but journalistic triumphs of audacious paradox.

But, for better or worse, the essay is the more popular today as it offers the most available opportunity of impressionistic writing in prose—in its own form, or in its manner in other forms, as the novel or the autobiography. Self-revelation, whether directly in the form of brief memoirs, or in that of playing with one's obsessions or prejudices, is always and always has been one of the favorite literary pastimes. If it is a large personality that thus reveals his inner experience, the result is valuable; if, as in some lyric poetry also, it is but the clamor of mediocrity, we can well afford to close our ears.

Chapter XV

THE EPIC—PROSE FICTION

THE TASTE FOR EPIC POETRY—ITS TRADITIONAL DIGNITY—THE THEME—DEFINITIONS OF THE EPIC—THE EPIC ATTITUDE—THE EPIC MANNER—THE SUPERNATURAL—"AUTHENTIC" AND "LITERARY" EPICS—EPIC MATERIAL—HOMER—BEOWULF—VIRGIL—DANTE—THE EPIC ROMANCES—MILTON—POETIC POWER AND VALUE—PROSE FICTION—RELATION TO THE EPIC—ITS POPULARITY—THE VALUE OF PROSE—REALISM AND THE EFFECT OF SCIENCE—THE INTEREST IN LESS SIGNIFICANT CHARACTERS—INTEREST IN SOCIAL VALUES—THE MOOD OF DISILLUSIONMENT—EFFECT OF JOURNALISM—NATURALISM—THE QUESTION OF SIGNIFICANCE.

I CONFESS to a secret and now ancient fondness for the long narrative poem. For the drama I had to overcome a quite intelligible distaste, it seemed—until I had seen my first play—a quite unnatural exercise, something as walking alone must seem to a timid child. The young want the right hand of the poet and the security of his voice. But the stories in verse,

> Of knighthood's dauntless deed and beauty's matchless eye,

these, and Sir Walter in particular, who was the genius of many a household, these are things some can never get away from, even though fashions change and the admired of yesterday now seem as empty as last year's birds' nests.

Who reads a long poem today? Walter Scott is, only temporarily we hope, abandoned to the upper shelves of the library. Spenser's *Faerie Queene* is left for "students majoring in English" and scholars. Even Milton's *Paradise Lost,* though mentioned with respect, is treated with still more distant courtesy. And epics a trifle more inaccessible, the *Beowulf,* Dante's *Divine Com-*

edy, Homer and Virgil, the *Orlando Furioso* of Ariosto, and the *Gerusalemme Liberata* of Tasso, are not much more than names unless an accident has led to the encounter. But others, though in a way no less important because they stand at the beginning of things in modern European literature—the *Cid,* the *Song of Roland,* those waifs of genius, the *Niebelungenlied,* and the long songs of the German trouvères, the *Parsifal* by Gottfried von Strassburg and the *Tristan und Iseult* by Wolfram von Eschenbach—even their names are scarcely known. Yet we can go farther; there are the epics of India, the *Ramayana* and its older rival the *Mahabharata,* whose length no single life may compass; and the huge epic of Persia, part of it a chronicle in verse, the *Shah Nameh,* whose publication was to bring the poet Firdausi, the heavenly, a good *mohar* a line—the very dignity and charm of these names should be a standing reproach.

Behind these are the thousand and one lesser poems, ambitious in matter at least; the myriad of metrical romances like *King Horn* or *Havelock;* the more ambitious efforts of known poets, like Pulci's *Morgante Maggiore,* Boiardo's *Orlando Innamorato* (Roland in Love), Ronsard's *Franciad,* Voltaire's *Henriade,* Klopstock's *Messiah.* Many of these have long been quite forgotten, and many deserve their fate—William Hayward Roberts *Judah Restored,* Richard Glover's *Leonidas.* This last was once compared favorably with Milton's *Paradise Lost!* American literature boasts one or two; Timothy Dwight—he was a college president when he was not writing poetry—wrote a *Columbiad* and a *Conquest of Canaan.* I believe students in American literature are still reminded of these, but they are read by no one.

For the long narrative poem, of the variety that has been called the epic, has a long and a dignified history. In many countries it was the first poetic effort, and until almost our own time it has been regarded, if not as the highest, at least as the next to the highest form of literary art. To the discerning it has always until now been held to be the most popular form of great literature. Aristotle, after some hesitation, put it just beneath tragedy in importance; but the Renaissance critics, one and all, and their

followers in the neo-classical school in both France and Italy, found no difficulty in confuting Aristotle. It is from these that Dryden gets his opinion, for which he had also gathered some evidence of his own. "Thus at least I have shown, that in the most perfect poem, which is that of Virgil, a perfect idea was required and followed; and consequently that all succeeding poets ought rather to imitate him, than even Homer." What Dryden means here, is that in the epic one can have perfect characters and perfect, that is, morally unexceptional, situations, such as neither tragedy nor comedy can pretend to. The tragic character, with his flaw, is imperfect, as is also the comic in his incongruity; but the epic character like Æneas or Ulysses can rise above all human blemishes. This, too, is the reason why he prefers Virgil to Homer, a preference he did not always show, but one shared by most of his French and Italian contemporaries; and a still more important reason for this aberration we shall examine later.

There is one further thought before we take up the task of seeking a definition of the epic; and it is a significant one. Out of the myriad of epics and near epics and would-be epics, there is only a scant handful that survive the test and stand out as really great poems. There are four in the first rank—Homer, Virgil, Dante, Milton. In another and far lower rank are a few more—*Beowulf* and the *Niebelungenlied,* then the *Song of Roland,* and the *Cid;* and the poem of Tasso and perhaps also that of Ariosto between the two ranks. Spenser we cannot call an epic poet, for reasons which will presently appear. And the oriental epics are so different in manner and matter, that we shall for the present leave them out of the discussion. But this rapid summary tells a significant story. In what other variety of literary art is the margin of safety for a writer so narrow? It is a serious handicap the epic poet accepts, for the chance of success is less than a gambler's.

And the reason is not very far to seek; there is something elevated in the very theme of the epic, something out of the ordinary in the impulses it arouses and in the final attitude, that dwarfs into relative insignificance most of the poetry and

the prose that deals with the usual motives of life. Achilles, Hector, Æneas, Dido, Dante's great characters, Milton's Satan—none of these ever were or ever could be like the mortals one meets in the routine of war or peace. There is a glamour about them which reveals rather than shrouds their humanity. They are convincing in a quite different manner from the realistic pictures of men and women we look for in novels or on the stage. Not only this, but their actions have a larger scope and a larger significance than is ever permitted in real life. Æneas fights a war with petty chieftains of forgotten little villages on the west Italian coast; in reality a most trivial incident, which might be duplicated a thousand times in pirate raids, ancient or modern. Any skirmish in the recent war was more bloody, and its issues apparently quite as irrelevant; and yet the poet's art has lent to the defeat and death of Turnus a tragic value we look for in vain in events historically far more decisive. The issues, moreover, of the events seem to have a weight quite out of proportion to any possible real significance. The war before Troy, from a just punishment of a pirate city becomes a matter of cosmic justice; the founding of the little and mythical Trojan colony near the banks of the Tiber becomes a fulfillment of the oracles of the past and an assurance of the future. These things cannot be done and at the same time be made convincing without the highest poetic art. And Milton, reducing the devil to the stature of mankind, or raising mankind to that of the devil—it makes little difference which—and bringing into the scope of one experience the whole cosmic drama of the fall of angels and man in a manner to insure poetic credence,—these are things that are not easy, even for the greatest of poets.

The epic poet must have a great story with great individuals, told in a great manner. I hope I shall in the sequel satisfactorily define the word "great." Too frequently, at least with earlier critics, the word has been limited to matters which had a close analogy to the *Iliad, Odyssey* and the *Æneid,* which for many generations were the only orthodox epics; all others were held to be pale imitations or negligible barbaric and hopelessly irregular

effusions such as Boileau so vigorously condemned. In truth, there is nothing, and should be nothing, exclusive in the epic; it arises from a perfectly natural impulse for a good story, one that will stir the imagination and lend a richness of meaning to life. This the old poet could most easily find in the things his audience would most easily welcome, the stories they best knew, of heroes and events in which they had a proprietary interest, only told in a new manner that would clothe them in a new significance, and reflect a light on themselves and their more prosaic existence.[1] Any story that will do this extremely well will possess the quality of greatness; but it takes a great poet to do it. Of the mediocre poets that preceded and followed Homer, and of the forgotten mediocrity that preceded Virgil, we have historical evidence. Of the mediocrity that clutters the history of modern literature, successors, predecessors, and contemporaries of Dante and Milton—we have their works and can judge more directly.

It is because of this large scope of the epic poet's imagination that Hegel was led to his generalization that an epic has as its concern "the life of a nation, or the history of an epoch and the totality of the beliefs of a people." The true poet always has his roots sunk deep into the life of his time, and his manner will be colored by the beliefs of his people; but what Hegel here asserts for the epic poet is true no less of the tragic, and as untrue. For it is difficult to see how a poem like the *Odyssey* or *Paradise Lost* gives the history of any epoch or the totality of its beliefs. Hegel's definition is too inclusive and as a result is deficient in sharp outlines.

The French critic of the seventeenth century, whose work had a powerful influence for a hundred years on both sides of the English Channel, Le Bossu, sees the seriousness of the epic from a quite different angle. Convinced beforehand that the function of all great literature is to give moral instruction coated with the sweetness of a story, "to mix the useful with the sweet," he has this to say of the epic, for as the greatest of all poetry its moral

[1] It is also for the same reason that early tragedy took for its plots the tales of legendary heroes, and Shakespeare's England had its vivid interest in early and later British kings.

value must be most obvious: "The epic is a story invented with art, to shape morals by instruction disguised under the allegory of a serious action, which is related in verse, and is convincing, interesting, and supernatural." This definition is not quite so irrelevant as it looks. We today have been trained away from the love of allegory, and have a suspicion that the allegorist somehow has the design of obtaining something under false pretenses. But the Middle Ages of Dante and the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries were not quite so tender in their conscience. I suggest the obvious popularity of Spenser. But Dante succeeded in transcending his allegory, Spenser did not; and this fact carries an obvious moral of its own. Whether a poem can be read allegorically or not is a question that does not now concern us; but of one fact we may be sure; if the poet writes consciously with the allegory as his main theme, his poem loses value. Even a poet may not serve two masters, one vital, the other abstract.

Another Frenchman, the Abbé Batteux, is not so good as his predecessor, though he tries to separate the epic from kindred species of poetry: "A narrative in verse of an action, convincing, heroic, and supernatural. In these few words you see the difference between the epic and the romance which passes beyond the convincing; and between the epic and history, which does not touch the supernatural; and between the epic and the drama, which is not a narrative; and between the epic and the other short poems, of which the subjects are not heroic." To be sure, this is far more precise than Boileau's description: *"Le vaste récit d'une longue action."* But somehow I like Boileau better; the simple word *"vaste"* has in it more of the secret of the epic scope than all the minutiæ of differentiation.

Two more modern definitions may help us more. I take the first from Professor Macneile Dixon. To him the epic is "A narrative poem, organic in structure, dealing with great actions and great characters, in a style commensurate with the lordliness of its theme, which tends to realize these characters and actions, and to sustain and embellish its subject by means of episodes

and amplifications." The other is by Professor Gayley: "The epic in general, ancient and modern, may be described as a dispassionate recital in dignified rhythmic narrative of a momentous theme or action fulfilled by heroic characters and supernatural agencies under the control of a sovereign destiny. The theme involves the political or religious interests of a people or of mankind; it commands the respect due to popular tradition or to traditional ideals. The poem awakens the sense of the mysterious, the awful, and the sublime; through perilous crises it uplifts and calms the strife of frail humanity." [1]

The only possible objection to these definitions is that they are based upon a careful inductive study of epics, and do not sufficiently take into cognizance the fact that all literary *genres* represent *"tendances de l'esprit humain,"* and that as a result they must meet new conditions by appropriate modifications. The supernatural, for example, is an accidental quality which one would hesitate to recommend to an epic poem of today. And further, splendid as it is, a "lordly theme" is not an essential. Goethe nearly made an epic of lowly life in his *Hermann und Dorothea.* With an adequate poet, in this day of a wider humanitarianism it might be most excellently done—who knows?

For the epic is rather a manner of looking at a story and a manner of telling it, than a variety of story. The *Divine Comedy* is as truly an epic in its nature as the *Iliad,* and yet it has only two external points in common with the work of Homer; it is told in verse and is significant. In all that concerns plot, characters, perilous crises, the two poems are utter strangers. Yet, in spite of the decision of Lascelles Abercrombie, we must call the *Divine Comedy* an epic, and one of the very greatest. Again, the *Faerie Queene* would have been an epic, though it has nothing in common with Virgil, if it could have been a poem. But lost in the mazes of its own allegorical ingenuity, and with its characters never able to disentangle themselves save for moments

[1] The theme of the epic is discussed fully in Gayley and Kurtz, *Methods and Materials of Literary Criticism.* The Bibliography and analysis of the subject is carefully done. No study of the subject can afford to ignore the carefully collected information found in this book.

from the mesh of their allegories, the thing is not a poem, but a kaleidoscope of exquisite poetry. It is most excellent epic material, but not an epic. But Spenser, like Milton, started out to write an epic poem; he got lost in the morass of the Renaissance love of allegory, a morass in which Dante and Milton might too have been lost had they not been supreme poets.

The epic is a story, and its first claim is the universal interest in a story. But in a story even the earliest peoples will look for something that will lend a significance to life. The charm of great poetry is like that of the new teaching that came to the old Northumbrians in pagan England. "So seems the life of man, O King," burst forth an aged Ealdorman after he had listened to the story, "as a sparrow's flight through the hall when you are sitting at meat in winter-tide, with the warm fire lighted on the hearth, but the icy rainstorm without. The sparrow flies in at one door and tarries for a moment in the light and heat of the hearth-fire, and then flying forth from the other vanishes into the wintry darkness whence it came. So tarries for a moment the life of man in our sight, but what is before it, what after, we know not. If this new teaching tells us aught certainly of these, let us follow it." Such also is the effect of the story of the epic on its hearers. I am thinking of the lesser epic, the *Song of Roland,* celebrating the age-long conflict of Christian and Moor in Spain, and the divine significance of the acts of the Christian hero Roland. Even when the cause he was fighting for seemed lost, and his followers all slain, and he wounded sore and at the point of death, he laid himself down facing the foe, strove to break his sword that no profane hand should ever wield it, and as a symbol that human power had done its utmost, reaching up, presented his glove to God; now it was Deity that must take up the conflict.

Roland feels that the end of his time has come. He lies on a rocky hillock looking towards Spain, and with one hand he beats his breast: "God, I am guilty before thee on account of the sins both great and small that I have committed, from the hour I was born to this day on

which I am struck down!" He has stretched out his right glove towards God. The angels of heaven descend to him.[1]

Remember this is twelfth-century Spain and southern France, and the peril of the followers of the Prophet was not an idle threat. Charlemagne and Roland and the twelve Peers were a symbol, not only of human prowess, but of the rightness of a great cause. The poem has this larger significance.

When Tasso wrote his *Jerusalem Delivered* and the story of the First Crusade when a Christian knight became ruler of the Holy City, the story of the epic was not alone a fanciful and stirring account of an historical episode embellished with poetical devices. The power of the Turk was a very real menace to the whole of Christendom. The Mediterranean swarmed with Barbary pirates; the coast of southern Italy still bears witness to the intensity of their pitiless raids on villages and towns. The battle of Lepanto had just been fought, and a Christian admiral had again humbled the pride of the Crescent. The poem had a very real significance, though to us these things now seem far away and fantastic.

It is precisely for this large significance that the story of the old epic preferred legend and history to fiction. There is nothing in the nature of the epic that demands these large themes, but the older epics have preferred them. And the reason is not far to seek; these stories have a dramatic quality and a convincingness that places them far above the ordinary human; they have a "vital symbolism" quite wanting in the invented stories, be they never so skillfully told.[2] The peasant auditor as well as the prince knew his Charlemagne and his Roland as his Greek fellow did his Achilles and his Ulysses. To show their lives as weaving a pattern that the hearer could understand—this was to tell something that lies "before and after," that lends a borrowed radiance to the meaner existence of every day.

[1] Crosland tr.

[2] It is interesting to contrast the use of legend, which had the credibility of history, and the use of pseudo-legend which has none of it, by reading, with Virgil and Homer in mind, the *Franciad* of Ronsard. The poet has plundered all Greek and Roman legend to make his plot of the founding of France by the son of Hector. One can't say of it, as was said of another matter: *"credo quia impossibile est."* The theft is too obvious.

It is for this reason that the older epics chose characters that exceed the stature of ordinary nature. Æneas is the founder of Rome, the greatest political institution that history had known; how could he be presented as a flawed personality subject to all the accidents of raw mortality? There is the recognizable criticism that Virgil in his effort to create a worthy ancestor for the Senate and the People of Rome sets before us an institution as impersonal as Rome itself; and that Dido, who was to have been the temptress whose seductions the genius of the Eternal City was to frustrate, became in the imagination of the poet the worthier character. But imperial Rome and the long centuries while the Roman tradition was still intact thought otherwise. To Dante, as to Dryden, the character of Æneas is perfect and morally convincing. Ulysses and Achilles, Hector and Priam, are far nearer the human level; but even they are raised to an imaginative elevation where their prowess and their passion set them apart, as in Dante the soldiers of the Cross, in a heaven by themselves.

But herein lies the peril for all lesser poets, to retain convincingness and yet to elevate the character. Spenser failed, for his characters are usually either pale abstractions or monstrous exaggerations. And it is precisely here that Milton's supreme power is at its highest. Satan, the supernatural, the Prince of Evil, in his rebellion against cosmic power and in his assertion of the worth of the individual, is a far more human personality than Adam. Never in all literature has poetic power compassed in its imagination so magnificently convincing and significant an episode as this, the cry of a defeated and yet unconquered personality:

> Nay curs'd be thou; since against his thy will
> Chose freely what it now so justly rues.
> Me miserable! which way shall I fly
> Infinite wrath, and infinite despair?
> Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell;
> And in the lowest deep a lower deep
> Still threatening to devour me opens wide,

To which the Hell I suffer seems a Heav'n.
O then at last relent; is there no place
Left for repentance, none for pardon left?
None left but by submission; and that word
Disdain forbids me, and my dread of shame
Among the spirits beneath, whom I seduc'd
With other promises and other vaunts
Than to submit, boasting I could subdue
Th' Omnipotent. Ay me, they little know
How dearly I abide that boast so vain,
Under what torments inwardly I groan;
While they adore me on the throne of Hell,
With diadem and sceptre high advanc'd
The lower still I fall, only supreme
In misery; such joy ambition finds.

. . . . . .

So farewell hope, and with hope farewell fear,
Farewell remorse: all good to me is lost;
Evil be thou my good; by thee at least
Divided empire with Heav'n's King I hold;
By thee, and more than half perhaps will reign;
As Man ere long, and this new World shall know.

This is superhuman, perhaps, but not unhuman.[1]

For the same reason the old epics and nearly all of the new deal in the supernatural. The supernatural is by no means an essential to epic poetry; indeed, in some cases the poem would have profited by its omission, notably Spenser's *Faerie Queene,* or by its being "craftily qualified." It is also by no means necessary that the poet or the audience believe implicitly in the supernatural machinery. Whether Homer believed in the stories of Zeus and his troublesome family of deities, whose turbulency could only be restrained by distracted threats, and whose dramatic irrelevance at times contrasts sharply with the tragic seriousness of the events on the Plain of Troy, whether Homer in pious credence told the story of the deception put on the all-wise Father

[1] To note how great poetry surpasses minor, contrast the spirit of *Paradise Lost* with either Du Bartas' *La Semaine* (translated by Sylvester, and exceedingly popular during the early years of the seventeenth century) or Klopstock's *Messiah.*

of men and gods by his intriguing wife—a deceit practiced over and over again with human victims in comedy—to all this we may have no certain answer, though it may be given us to doubt. Certainly Homer has two uses for Zeus, one near-comic, the other serious and deeply religious—as we conceive of religion.

As certainly Virgil did not believe in his deities; Juno and Venus, Mercury and Neptune, are only the borrowed paraphernalia of the old epic, and nothing that has any vital significance. Yet Virgil's Jupiter at times has an impersonal grandeur that raises him above the action of the story. The supernatural in the *Beowulf* is not theological, but a blind destiny—Wyrd—to which the human understanding has no clue. And against it the bleak, desolate courage of the hero has a tragic grandeur that lends something to the poem lacking even in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. But the supernatural in the later epics, except *Paradise Lost,* is frankly a pure poetic imitation of the machinery of the old epic. Boileau even goes so far as to require it in all epics:

> Thus in the endless treasure of his mind
> The poet does a thousand figures find,
> Around the work his ornaments he pours,
> And strews with lavish hand his opening flowers.[1]

And there may be a reason for it that the critics of the seventeenth century never quite suspected. These noble fictions do serve in a very real way to lend a larger grandeur to the human panorama of the epic. The gods of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* may quarrel among themselves and act in an utterly childish manner, but the motives for their pettiness are the human beings agonizing in the war or on the sea. Juno's wrath in the *Æneid—tantæni animis cælestibus iræ*—is against a mortal, and lends a distinction to the exploits of Æneas that might otherwise have been lacking. If man's actions in the epic are against a background of interested supernatural powers, or, as in the *Beowulf,* if he is in conflict with powers of more than mortal scope, is not a cubit added to the stature of man and a borrowed glamour lent to his story? At

[1] Soames tr.

least such is a possible answer to that school of super-realists who can see nothing in the mingling of fact with fancy in the old epic.[1]

I think that now we can without argument dispense with the theory, which never could make itself quite convincing, that there is an essential difference between the old "authentic" epic, like the *Iliad* or *Beowulf,* and the later "literary" imitation, like the *Æneid* or *Paradise Lost;* and that there is a value in the "natural" manner of the one that the later "artificial" copy could never quite attain to. Literary historians have played with the words *epos* and *epopée* as though there were something of primitive magic in the old communities, a spontaneous power of literary generation, that our later more self-conscious and civilized lives have lost to us; and that after a people's youthful origins the age for gendering a true epic is outgrown.

It is idle also to speak of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as primitive. The civilization of the time of Homer was essentially, at least, not different from that in classical Greece, except that the world was smaller, and the art of writing may have been, so far as we know, to him unknown. The social conditions that gave us *Beowulf* were likewise not in any sense primitive; there was a stable society and a degree of culture that any one who reads the poem can readily picture. The only vital difference between these and the *Æneid* or even the *Jerusalem Delivered* is that they were transmitted by the poet who composed them by oral tradition, instead of having been immediately set down in writing. And during the process of transmission liberties undoubtedly were here and there taken with the original text, liberties that in some cases we can easily detect. Out of the mist of prehistoric antiquity it is as easy to see the figure of the unknown Homer or the nameless author of the early English poem as it is to see the author of *Paradise Lost;* for he left his best token in the unmistakable genius of the poem, and the lack of biographical knowledge is not much more than an irrelevant episode.

[1] See in this connection Lascelles Abercrombie, *The Epic.*

Nor is there an essential difference in manner between the composition of the "authentic" and the "literary" poem. The authors of both had at hand an amount of epic material, in tradition as well as in poetry, and a community wanting a story. The only real difference was in the character of the community; and the effect of this one can easily detect in the character of the poems. But literary epics of different ages also have differences in the character of the communities, and these, too, leave indelible traces upon the temper of the poems. Dante's *Divine Comedy* is not like the *Æneid,* though Dante's passionate love for the old Italian poet made Virgil a guide and counselor to the gate of Heaven.

The epic material is always at hand ready for the poet when he appears. The stories of the Trojan war, the wanderings of the Greek heroes after the war, the heroic legends of ancient Greece, as the heroic legends of any country—these things are common property, and have analogies in all nations. The Persian Firdausi threw out his poetic net and drew in nearly all of the historical legends of ancient Persia and worked them into a poem, long and hugely episodic, without beginning and without end, but intensely vivid in its best episodes, and with a poetic power no translation has yet been able to reveal.[1] The story of David and Saul in the book of Samuel in the Bible is another most excellent collection of epic material, here partly worked up into a plot, and almost ready to be called a prose epic. The glory of Homer, his largest claim to poetic originality, was his ability to fuse his material, carefully selected out of the uncertain mass at hand, into a plot. He did once and for all, at the very beginning of the European tradition of letters, what in many other countries was never done, or done only incompletely—he discovered the secret of poetic form.[2] Out of the issues of a ten-years' war Homer selected the events of only a few days; of all the conflicting passions of the

[1] See Matthew Arnold's *Sohrab and Rustum,* an English version of one of the more pathetic episodes. The Arnold version, made from an English translation, is not equal to the original.

[2] What this implies can easily be discovered if one compares the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* with the Persian epic, composed about two thousand years later, or with the Indian epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata.* The formlessness of these last compares most unfavorably with the orderliness of Homer. Yet the oriental poets, too, had the gift of poetry.

war he put his hand on only the wrath of Achilles and its tragic consequences. It must have cost him a wrench to leave unsaid the many other notable things; but "they were another story," and he was a supreme artist. The great epic is as sound in its economy of form as it is in its power of sustained poetry.

But the significance of the Greek epics is not confined alone to the ages in which they were produced, they have values that come down with the centuries and seem inexhaustible. Homer's attitude toward life is serious. Never for a moment does he forget the hatefulness of death, and the emptiness of renown after death. It is the greatest of his heroes, Achilles, who speaks disillusioningly of the mystery of life and death: "Nay, speak not comfortably to me of death, O great Odysseus. Rather would I live on ground as the hireling of another, with a landless man who had no great livelihood, than bear sway among all the dead that be departed." And at best life is a pitiful existence, compared with the immortal peace of the gods. "For methinketh," it is Zeus speaking, "there is nothing more piteous than a man among all things that breathe and creep upon the earth." But, and this thought saves Homer from a supine oriental pessimism, life is not given man that he may pine away in inactivity. There is something superb in the heroic attitude toward life and death:

Glaukos, wherefore have we twain the chiefest honour,—seats of honour, and messes, and full cups in Lykia, and all men look on us as gods? And wherefore hold we a great demesne by the banks of Xanthos, a fair demesne of orchard-land, and wheat-bearing tilth? Therefore now it behoveth us to take our stand in the first rank of the Lykians, and encounter fiery battle, that certain of the well-corsleted Lykians may say, "Verily our kings that rule Lykia be no inglorious men, they that eat fat sheep, and drink the choice wine honey-sweet: nay, but they are also of excellent might, for they war in the foremost ranks of the Lykians." Ah, friend, if once escaped from this battle we were for ever to be ageless and immortal, neither would I fight myself in the foremost ranks, nor would I send thee into the war that giveth men renown, but now—for assuredly ten thousand fates of death do every way beset us, and these no mortal may escape

nor avoid—now let us go forward, whether we shall give glory to other men, or others to us.[1]

To the gods alone it is granted to enjoy a strifeless existence; for man there is the zest of adventure and honorable courage that snatches a victory from the very jaws of defeat.

Homer's heroes are not all, nor at all times, fearless and passionless human beings. They are very human in their weakness as well as in the glory of victory or in the courage of a well-met defeat. Patroclus, perhaps the finest of loyal friends, has no shame of tears when occasion prompts them:

> And noble swift-footed Achilles when he beheld him was grieved for his sake, and accosted him, and spake winged words, saying: "Wherefore weepest thou, Patroklos, like a fond little maid, that runs by her mother's side, and bids her mother take her up, snatching at her, till the mother takes her up? like her, Patroklos, dost thou let fall soft tears."

These are the tears and the emotion of a hero, not of a renegade. And the same hero will quit himself like a man when occasion demands and die unafraid under the lance of Hector. Life is an adventure for great deeds, not alone for the renown that comes for excellence, but for the sheer zest of the doing. The peaceful life is for the immortals alone, who need no compensation for death and suffering; to mortal man, whose destiny is ever in wait for him, and whose weakness is more than his strength, the only compensation is activity, noble activity which shall bring its reward in the consciousness of personal worth and recognized dignity. Such in brief is Homer's view of the value of the heroic life. To see its significant depth one may compare it with a diluted modern version in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Æs Triplex.*

It is a starker courage we see in the heroic legend of *Beowulf,* unrelieved by the beauty of the south, a courage and a loyalty. As Homer is rich in his grasp of the manifold aspects of life, the *Beowulf* is singularly unrelieved in its downright simplicity and singleness of purpose:

[1] This and the others from the Lang, Leaf, and Myers translation.

I, then, so may my liege-lord, Hygelac, find pleasure in me, shall think scorn to bear sword or the broad shield, yellow-rimmed, to the battle, but with my hand-grip shall I join with the fiend and fight to the death, foe against foe. I ween that Grendel, if he prevail, shall feast undismayed on the Geat-folk in the war-hall, as he hath oft done on the might of the Hrethmen. Thou shalt not need then to hide my head away; for Grendel will have me, stained with blood, if death take me, will bear away the bloody corse and think to devour it; he, the lone-goer, will eat it ungrieving, and smear with my blood his moor-lairs; no longer shalt thou need then to care for my body's nurture. Send to Hygelac, if warfare take me, the best of battle-weeds, goodliest of garments, that guards my breast—it was the bequest of Hrethla, and the handwork of Weland. Wyrd goeth ever as she must! [1]

Virgil wrote when life had no longer the restricted horizon of the Homeric world and society. Rome was now lawgiver and mistress of the world, and the word *civis Romanus* had a connotation the old Greek would never have understood. The mechanical order of the Roman state, with its subordination of the individual to the needs and welfare of the whole, had its counterpart in a new view of the universe as a realm of law in which man's personality had little opportunity to claim any special prerogative; an inflexible social order, and an inflexible cosmic order, and a Jove as an impersonal Destiny, as imperturbable as a Roman Emperor. This is the background that lends its poignancy to the passionate rebuke with which Virgil silences his imaginative craving:

Desine fata deum flecti sperare precando.[2]

It is with the same chilling thought that he faces the passionate tragedy of Dido, a victim to the over-ruling destiny of the Roman Empire.

Others, I ween, shall labour the breathing bronze to softer mould; they shall charm the features of life forth from the marble; they shall plead the cause with apter tongue; their wand shall trace the courses of heaven; and they shall tell the renascent stars! Roman, be this thy

[1] Child trans.
[2] Cease to hope by prayers to sway the fate of the gods.

care—these thine arts—to bear dominion over the nations and to impose the law of peace, to spare the humbled and to war down the proud! [1]

It is the contest between the claims of love and art and beauty, and the impersonal gravity of the Roman state, between the value of the person and the reign of cosmic law, that sharpens the edge of the tragedy of Æneas and Dido, that lends its pathos to the death of youth, Pallas and Camilla, and the heroic Nisus and Euryalus. The greatness of Virgil is seen in the paradox, seen also in Homer, but here with a larger implication, of the passionate assertion of human value and the imperturbable impersonality of destiny. But Virgil's heroes lack the zest of life in which Homer's heroes find a compensation. The Roman world was weary in the days of the Roman poet, weary and waiting for a new inspiration.

I think now we can understand why the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Europe, and especially in Roman Europe, set such high store by Virgil. The old Roman ideal was far from dead, though it had suffered an eclipse during the Middle Ages. And the disillusionment after the passions of the Reformation and the wars; and the new patriotism and its responsibilities after the new monarchies were strongly established; and above all the strong ethical content of the new social order—all these things lent to Virgil an authority and an austere wisdom they could not find even in Homer.

But the inspiration the Roman poet was awaiting was to come in the new other-worldliness of Christianity. And Dante as the poet of mediæval Christianity was to write its epic poem. There have been critics who have denied the term epic to the *Divine Comedy,* but this is only because its form and savor are not those of the epics of other peoples and times. But as mediæval Christianity was unlike pagan Greece or imperial Rome, with a quite different set of values, its epic likewise must have other heroic characters and other motives for heroism. The hero of mediæval Christianity was the contemplative saint, the Saint Francis or

[1] Jackson, tr.

Saint Thomas, who had learned to value aright this world in its relation to the next, and who knew that against divine knowledge all worldly accomplishments were less than nothing. So Dante, the symbol of all humanity, is the hero of the poem, and his story, not the accomplishment of great deeds and the acquiring of fame, but the gradual accomplishment of the supernal attitude, where love and knowledge, power and glory, all fuse in the ecstatic vision of perfect bliss.

> So was my mind completely in suspense,
> Fixedly gazing, motionless, intent,
> And ever with its gazing more on fire.
> And such before that Light does one become,
> It is impossible one e'er consent
> To turn away from it to view aught else;
> Because the good, the object of the will,
> Is all collected there; outside of it
> That is defective which is perfect there.

But this is not a bliss empty of content, like that of the oriental Nirvana, but one in which there is present every good that is recognizable, and above all the highest good of perfected personality.

Against this large acceptance of a glorified ascetic ideal there was always present in the Middle Ages the protest of romance and its discovery of good in this life and compensation in heroism and love. Chivalric love is one form of this protest, though it had been purged by the ascetic ideal of its grosser passion; and it stands beautiful in its idealism against these dark centuries. And it has given us its epics, many of them, though most are not of great value. The *Romance of the Rose* never was able to pull its feet free and give wings to its imagination. But the *Tristan* and the *Parsifal* are the monuments to the other side of the Middle Ages, a side that never was converted to the gospel of the saints; *Tristan* frankly of this world and tragic in its futile gesture, the *Parsifal,* after its acceptance of the goods of this world, fleeing to the sanctuary of renunciation.

And Milton—Abercrombie's enthusiasm for the *Paradise Lost* is refreshing in these days when Milton is almost a neglected poet. "In *Paradise Lost,*" he writes, "the development of epic poetry culminates, as far as it has yet gone," for "Milton has the greatest motive that has ever ruled a poet." Whether this judgment be right or wrong I leave to others; but it is true that Milton is justly in the epic tradition, and closer to Dante than his dissenting protestantism perhaps is aware. But with him the essential paradox of life—the theme of all great poetry—receives a more illuminating and clear definition. Let us for the sake of clearness indulge in a brief generalization—even at the peril that accompanies it.

Homer saw the fatal paradox of man's weakness and his destiny. But this does not dismay the hero, but stimulates him to fresh courage. "Yea, verily these issues be in the lap of the gods: I, too, will cast my spear, and the rest shall Zeus decide." In the sheer zest of dangerous and brave living the Homeric hero exalted his personality and won character and renown. With Virgil, in an age of world-weariness, the zest of life had gone, and in its place we have the resolute stoicism of duty and resignation. The cosmic order and its moral counterpart, the state, brought its compensations in which Æneas sought a comfort for self-less labor and tragedy. Dante by a hard denial renounces the world, seeing in its grotesque irrelevancies, not tragedy, but comedy; and from its imperfections he rises by knowledge and love, truly directed, to the perfection of God. Dante denies the paradox.

But the world and its imperfections are real to Milton; not in a merely temporary sense as he asserts, for the poet is a protestant and the eternity of perfection to him is yet a far-off event. How shall he reconcile the eternal justice and goodness of God with this imperfect world and yet more imperfect humanity? And more than once for the symbol of humanity he selects the potent personality of Satan. It is by the sheer power of his will that man achieves personality and character; will directed oftener than not in direct opposition to the plan of the Almighty, impotent for action perhaps, and hopeless against a cosmic order governed

by the Good; yet even in his tragic infirmity achieving the one thing that gives humanity value—moral character. This is the supreme achievement of Milton, out of the very heart of evil to achieve the good; for it is evil alone that can lend to moral life significance. This is the miracle of the Puritan conscience—a thing that all too often is to us a thing drab and unsavory, but to Milton, the poet, it is character. Milton as effectively as Dante sums up and closes an epoch in human achievement.

Perhaps in this last we can catch a glimpse of what is the next great theme for epic treatment. Milton is yet closer to the Middle Ages, in many ways, than to our own times. The great paradox of life appears to him in theological and philosophical terms, a mode of looking at things mostly foreign to the *"tendance de l'esprit humain"* today. Now it is the mechanisms of physics and biology and psychology that lend new factors to the paradox of life, and not the intelligent cunning of a cosmic devil. Will a new epic poem be possible on such a theme? Or is this a thing better suited to the larger freedom of prose? There are poetic efforts today that seem to hold out a distant hope. I have in mind such poems as Edward Arlington Robinson's revitalizing of the old epic material of King Arthur and his court. The age of the epic need by no means be dead; it only awaits the coming of the great poet, and visits like his are rare.

But the greatness of the epic lies not alone in its intellectual and moral theme, important as is its significance. There is the grandeur in it and the vitality of great poetry. It is easy to account superficially for the verse of the early epics; yet the invention of the heroic hexameters of Homer is nothing short of a miracle in metrics, the long ebb and flow of the rhythm, and its endless power of variation, so supple is it in the hands of a great poet in contrast to the ruder and more monotonous ballad meter. Some sort of verse was necessary for the mere matter of memory and song. But verse alone does not make poetry; and the great epics are first of all great poetry. Homer's supremacy is never finer than in the exquisite fitness of his verse, its utter adequacy to the experience in hand. It rises with perfect command of itself

from exquisite brief imagery to the climax of passion. One can select almost at random. We shall have to content ourselves with two quotations, and these unfortunately we shall have to see darkly in a translation. The first is the death of the boy-warrior Gorgythion, son of Priam: "Even as in a garden a poppy droopeth its head aside, being heavy with fruit and the showers of spring; so bowed he aside his head laden with his helm." [1] The other I take from the last book of the *Iliad*. Old Priam, the King, has gone to the victorious Achilles to beg the body of his slain son Hector:

And as they both bethought them of their dead, so Priam for manslaying Hector wept sore as he was fallen before Achilles' feet, and Achilles wept for his own father, and now again for Patroklos, and their moan went up throughout the house. But when noble Achilles had satisfied him with lament, and the desire thereof departed from his heart and limbs, straightway he sprang from his seat and raised the old man by his hand, pitying his hoary head and hoary beard, and spake unto him winged words and said: "Ah hapless! many ill things verily thou hast endured in thy heart. How durst thou come alone to the ships of the Achaians and to meet the eyes of the man who hath slain full many of thy brave sons? Of iron verily is thy heart. But come then set thee on a seat, and we will let our sorrows lie quiet in our hearts, for all our pain, for no avail cometh of chill lament. This is the lot the gods have spun for miserable men, that they should live in pain; yet themselves are sorrowless. For two urns stand upon the floor of Zeus filled with his evil gifts, and one with blessings. To whomsoever Zeus whose joy is in the lightning dealeth a mingled lot, that man chanceth now upon ill and now again on good, but to whom he giveth but of the bad kind him he bringeth to scorn, and evil famine chaseth him over the goodly earth, and he is a wanderer honoured of neither gods nor men."

Virgil is not the poet Homer was. There is a shrillness at times to his passion that is in sharp contrast to Homer's restraint.

[1] I give the Greek for those who can follow it:

Μήκων δ'ὡς ἑτέρωσε κάρη βάλεν, ἥ τ'ἐνὶ κήπῳ,
καρπῷ βριθομένη νοτίῃσί τε ἐαρινῇσιν,
ὡς' ἑτέρωσ' ἤμυσε κάρη πήληκι βαρυνθέν.

And yet what can one subtract from this, the grief of the abandoned Dido:

> More, there stood in the palace a marble shrine to her earlier lord, which she held in wondrous honour, crowning it with snowy fillets and festal boughs. Thence she seemed to hear the voice of her husband speaking and calling when night hung grey over earth; and oft on the roof the owl wailed forlorn with his sepulchral dirge and long-drawn note of melancholy; while many a prophecy, withal, of the old-world seers affrighted her with warning of dread. As she slept, the form of very Æneas hounded her, pitiless of her frenzy, and ever she seemed abandoned to her sole self—ever journeying uncompanioned on an endless way, and seeking her Tyrians in a lorn land.

The poetry that would express the passion of abandoned grief has never acquitted itself with more convincing power. This is the Virgil who introduced to Europe the passionate note of the tragedy of romance.

It is not necessary to quote from the other great epic poets. Their works are easily accessible, and their poetry a perpetual invitation. These are things prose may not aspire to; and when depth and richness is discovered in an experience, when its significance is such that it calls into activity man's complete personality, the utterance will ever be in poetry.

This, however, is distinctly an age of prose; for some three hundred years and more, prose has steadily fought its way forward, first against heavy prejudice and active dislike, then tolerated as a practical and convenient ally of poetry, until now it stands supreme in the writer's first intention. Only his second intentions are in verse; and these are not always enthusiastically received. And as the symbol of its victorious career, prose has taken for its means of communicating a story the form of prose fiction. The world today is divided into two classes, those who read fiction and those who write it, and the honors between them seem about even.

There is a relation, and not a distant one, between the novel

and the epic. It was not entirely by chance that the first real novel, in the modern sense, was written in the time of Shakespeare by a gifted Spaniard, as a burlesque of the epic—not of the good epic, I hasten to add; Cervantes was too true a lover of good literature to befoul his own nest; but of the sundry job-lot imitations of the manner of the epic with which Spain like the rest of Europe was at that time flooded. Little did he then dream that this child of his imagination was to have a progeny that in time was to drive even the good epics into dusty seclusion. But the history of literature has more than one of such ironical jests that turn into bitter earnest.

Cervantes' *Don Quixote* borrowed the plot and the episodes from the epic; for the serious theme it found a substitute first in farcical burlesque, and then, as the author got better acquainted with his characters, sympathetic humor. For the power of poetry he had also the adequate substitute of careful objective detail, realism. And with this he builded better perhaps than he knew; the story came to be—and this is no exaggeration—unique of its kind, one of the greatest, if not the greatest novel ever written. Cervantes is for the novel what Homer is for epic poetry. This does not mean that there were not writers of realistic stories before the beginning of the seventeenth century, any more than it means that there were no epic attempts before Homer. But as the predecessors of Homer are all forgotten, so, save for curious scholarship and the interest in literary origins, the predecessors of Cervantes might easily be lost in some literary deluge, and the world of literature would suffer not the slightest discommodity.

People liked it in spite of what they thought their better judgment. It was frankly vulgar, like the picaresque novels and tales, and unashamed. The age winked at vulgarity while it condemned it in its official utterances, as do some officials today with popular pastimes they do not entirely wish to control. I like these lines in Boileau's *L'Art Poétique:*

> In stories of trifles 'tis easy all faults to excuse,
> Enough that in reading the fiction amuse.

But he adds also: "One wearies of the exploits of a hero rude." The public, however, was not "bored" by this "vulgar hero" because he was of a new type, as also his adventures. From the old *fabliaux* was taken the interest in the common people, and the gross comedy; from the imagination of Cervantes came the humor that raises the story above the commonplace. But from the epic came the sense of form, the plot and the desultory manner of the episodes. From the epic came also the seriousness that runs like a slowly unfolding theme through the story. And from the life about him, from the villages and highways of Spain, the inns and the houses of the petty gentry, came the life that was to lend its stamp to the new literary *genre*.[1]

Again, in spite of the peril which lies in wait for all generalization, I think it can safely be said that, in general, fiction, and especially the novel, aims to secure by means of objective reality something of the significance that the epic secures by means of poetry. That prose is better suited for realism than poetry we have already noted, and why.[2] Had Cervantes wished a genuine burlesque of the high epic manner he would have done much better in poetry, as Chaucer in his *Sir Tophas,* or Butler in his *Hudibras,* or Pope in his *Rape of the Lock,* or Boileau in his *Le Lutrin,* or Tassoni in the *Secchia Rapita.* His prose threw him immediately into a quite different state of mind, with the obvious result. For to make the pictures complete and convincing, the writer must pile detail upon detail, and lend to each object its color and character. The patience with which Cervantes builds up his appearance of reality, the long description, and the endless dialogues—not a single thing of interest escapes him. To be sure, modern fiction has abandoned something of the encyclopædic manner of massing these details, and slips them in with more cunning, catching the reader's attention rather by their unobtrusiveness. But the method, clumsy or refined, is the same for

[1] I am not anxious to push too far the debt that fiction owes to the old epic. It is known, however, that Fielding was a student of Le Bossu's *traité* on the epic. Certainly Cervantes was indebted to the plot technique of the current epics of Spain and Italy. See the catalogue of books in the library of his hero.

[2] See Chapter IV. The prose story of the "marvelous" has seldom been popular.

all prose; without the careful objective reference there can be little convincingness of reality.

And it is further true that by means of the cumulative effect of objective detail prose can arrive at an emotive value that in poetry is achieved far more rapidly by the use of imagery. So that a scene in prose like the death of Don Quixote is, in its way, as effective as anything one could wish.

"Item, I give and bequeath to Sancho Panza, whom in my madness I made my squire, whatever money he has, or may have of mine in his hands; and whereas there are reckonings and accounts to be adjusted between us, for what he has received and disbursed; my will and pleasure is, that whatever may remain due to me, which can be but small, be enjoyed by him as my free gift, without any let or molestation, and much good may it do him. And as, when I was mad, he was through my means made governor of an island, I would now, in my right senses, give him the government of a kingdom, were it in my power, in consideration of his integrity and faithfulness. And now, my friend," said he, turning to Sancho, "pardon me that I have brought upon thee, as well as myself, the scandal of madness, by drawing thee into my own errors, and persuading thee that there have been and still are knights-errant in the world."

"Woe's me, my dear master's worship!" cried Sancho, all in tears, "do not die this bout, but even take my counsel, and live on many years; it is the maddest trick a man can ever play in his whole life, to let his breath sneak out of his body without any more ado, and without so much as a rap over the pate, or a kick on the guts; to go out like a snuff of a farthing candle, and die merely of the mulligrubs, or the sullens. For shame, sir, do not give way to sluggishness, but get out of your doleful dumps, and rise. Is this a time to lie honing and groaning a-bed, when we should be in the fields in our shepherd's clothing, as we had resolved? . . .

"Soft and fair, gentleman," replied Don Quixote, "never look for birds of this year in the nests of last: I was mad, but I am now in my senses; I was once Don Quixote de la Mancha but am now, as I said before, the plain Alonso Quixano, and I hope the sincerity of my words, and my repentance, may restore me to the same esteem you have had for me before; and so, Mr. Scrivener, pray go on."

Prose always has at its disposal the power of referring to objects that have strong emotive possibilities, and at times even by means of these references to bring before us things horrid and revolting, or scenes of violence and suffering, that are seemingly beyond the reach of poetry. It will be interesting to inquire later how far this ability to be precise in objective reference is consistent with excellence in art. Moreover, the powerfully emotive quality of a situation thus clearly portrayed is by no means a sign that because it is poignant, it is therefore also valuable. It is no more a sign that something important is going on in the mind, than a violent toothache is a sign of the approach of death. The restrained poignancy in the scene of the death of Don Quixote is valuable, not for the emotion alone—this might be aroused by the vivid picture of any death—nor for its objective truth alone, but for the final glimpse we catch in it of the personality of the fantastic and affectionate old idealist. The pattern of the mental state which is our response to this is a very different thing from the elemental impulses aroused by mere physical suffering or horror. A large part of the question of literary criticism, as we have seen, rests upon our ability to distinguish between such states of the mind, and we are warned not to look merely at the pointer of the emotional meter.

Fiction today is interested in fact, objectively verifiable, and has been increasingly so interested since the first great novel, *Don Quixote,* was written.[1] It is an interest which finds itself without parallel in the history of literature. One of the obvious reasons for this is, of course, the large place science, and especially the social sciences and psychology, occupy in our lives. We have learned to look at fact with a new interest, and with the confident expectation of finding in it, as in the fact of science, some value. Flaubert, when he gave the young de Maupassant his first lessons in writing, as we are told in the Introduction to *Pierre et Jean,* was doing only what any instructor in physics or chemistry does to

[1] I hope I shall be pardoned for the seeming carelessness in the use of terms, making fiction and the novel synonymous. I only do it because the novel so obviously dominates the field. I am not interested here in the distinction between the novel and the romance. The distinction is never clearly maintained in English or in French or in German. Nor is this the place to treat by itself the short story.

his pupils, encouraging them and impressing upon them the vital necessity of careful observation. The new psychology in addition seems to have opened up entirely new realms for careful observation of hitherto unsuspected facts—yet not so unsuspected as the psychologist imagines, as one may see if one will look at the poems of Euripides or Shakespeare—and we have as a result stories and novels like those of Marcel Proust where the action is almost exclusively mental. O'Neill's *Strange Interlude* is largely of this variety, a curious blend of novel and drama. Sometimes even the highest praise is bestowed upon a novel because it has correctly documented its facts, as a scientist is praised who successfully controls his experiments. All this has, as we shall see, its valuable side.

Consistent with this scientific interest in fact, the novel from the beginning has found its most acceptable field in the life of more or less ordinary people. There is, of course, the large and extremely popular form of fiction—we sometimes call it romance —that has followed more closely in the path of the heroic poem, and looked for its interest in the adventures of extraordinary persons who lived in an extraordinary and half-imaginary age. The authors of such tales, like Walter Scott, Dumas, Sienkiewicz, are in reality often handling old epic material in prose, and as such their works should be judged. But the novel, as I am describing it here, looks for its theme in another realm; and though it may pick a historical character and a story of a past long gone by, its interest is not in the romance of departed glory but, like *Henry Esmond,* in people in a significant but actual situation. As a result the center of interest here shifts from that of the epic. In the epic the hero and the actors have a certain symbolical character; they represent humanity in the large, a nation or a people, or a religion, or, as in Dante and Milton, all mankind. In the novel, on the other hand, the characters play a far lesser rôle; they are human beings, and their fortunes far more limited in significance.

It is for this reason that the novel has what appears to be a far lesser scope than the epic, and that a novelist if he wishes to

represent a large human situation must multiply his characters and extend his canvas. Homer could give a full philosophy of life in the *Iliad,* but Balzac or Thomas Hardy or Galsworthy have their long lists of volumes. And even the single novel, which would take a single situation and give its complete significance, takes a multitude of pages. It is interesting, for example, to contrast the career of Homer's Achilles in the *Iliad* with that of Fielding's Tom Jones. Both are perfect of their kind; but the commonplace significance of the English boy can be made obvious only as we travel across a huge variety of adventures.

Yet the prose novelist, though he must use a larger canvas and has his interest more restricted by the stubbornness of fact, is not in consequence fettered in his interpretation of the first problem of human destiny. Steadily from the first this interest has kept pace with the growing knowledge of the complexity of human life. If the interest of the epic was rather more cosmic in its significance, the interest of the novel has been social. There are magnificent exceptions—Thomas Hardy is as resolute in facing the supreme problem of the destiny of man in an apparently indifferent universe as Homer or the Greek tragedians. The gloom that envelops Egdon Heath is something almost supernatural in its weird power, and is as relentless as cosmic law. George Eliot, likewise, sees in life more than the struggle between social forces and the individual. But to most the interest is man and society and their relations. To Fielding the problem was a simple one, for the background is the simple life of an eighteenth-century country squire whose greatest adventure was the way of the young man with a maid; and when this had been satisfactorily solved the story was over, and Tom could settle down to the routine of squiredom. The amazing thing is the story Fielding accomplishes with this unpromising theme, and how essentially complex he shows even simplicity to be, if we but inquire curiously into the matter. It is like the modern scientist who breaks the atom and discovers a universe. For Tom Jones becomes a very real human personality, as vital in his way as an epic hero.

It is interesting to follow the gradual shift in this interest in

the problem of men's place in society and the effect of society on the individual, from decade to decade, and from country to country. The nineteenth century was the age of large experiment and wholesale social thinking. When one remembers that the social sciences during these years first received adequate attention, one is not surprised at the keen interest fiction took in making the question concrete. Thackeray, though a mild satirist of the foibles of English middle-class society, and in this a follower of the comic attitude of Molière, is yet something more. His Colonel Newcome, Henry Esmond, Arthur Pendennis are also personalities, into whose complexity have entered factors which in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were unavailable, and, in particular, a kindly humor and a spirit of genial tolerance, which forgives even the Becky Sharps and Captain Costigans. Contrasted, however, with Dickens, Thackeray belongs to a larger epoch. Dickens, with his sentimental love for the waifs and unfortunates, reflects the growing interest in the lower classes, a group which up to a hundred years ago had few advocates in literature.

But their time was to come with a vengeance. Since Dostoevski, the novel has found its richest interest in portraying the inequalities and injustices which are at the heart of society. And fiction as a result has fallen vigorously to exploiting the débris of society, the misfits, and those wounded in the struggle for existence. As in science Darwin had explained his scientific theory of the survival of the fittest, the most significant of the novels took upon themselves to defend the unfit who were being destroyed by the advance of civilization, and to picture the cruelty that an unjust social system imposes upon its victims. This is the age of Dostoevski, Turgenev, Tolstoy, and later of Gorky in Russia, of Zola in France, of Echegaray in Spain. We have scarcely yet got ourselves free of this ruck of social novels.

In the meanwhile the new science of psychology was beginning to publish its discoveries in the nature of the mind of man. The result in fiction was gradually to transfer the interest from the external scene to the conflict within the human mind. Studies

of character and motives began to acquire a new significance as their authors began to use a new technique. George Eliot shows the first large interest in this field, but in her the moralist was always getting in the way of the artist; and it is not until nearly our own time that the new psychological novel came fully into its own, as in Romain Rolland's *Jean Christophe,* a huge spiritual biography with nearly a complete background of all the complex forces of modern civilization. In Germany came the ambitious work of Thomas Mann, *Buddenbrooks;* followed, after an interval of twenty years, by *Der Zauberberg,* or *Magic Mountain.* It would seem that we are at the beginning of a new and even more ambitious variety of novel.

There is in many of these a prevailing note of disillusioned sadness, as though modern science with its tremendous material gifts to mankind has little in the way of spiritual compensation to offer. At times the motive is the cynical indifference of a worn-out imagination that can see nothing worthy of an enthusiasm. At others we catch a more sinister motive, a prevailing belief that all human nature, in spite of its pretty phrases and pleasing philosophies, is at heart moved by secret springs of sheer animal lust. Out of the morass, as some picture it, of conflicting brute impulse, which is human nature, it is difficult to discover the redeeming traits of the larger humanity, that from the beginning has been the theme of great literature.

Again, added to this new interest due to science, and perhaps influenced in part also by science, is the new world-wide industry of journalism. The job of the journalist can only by a generous hospitality be called literary; but, whether we like it or not, the nose of the journalistic camel has been followed by its whole huge bulk into the bewildered tent of literature. It was in the days of Defoe and Addison a welcome addition to the literary feast to admit the decorous or witty journalist guest. He brought a new and a valuable way of looking at things, and a new set of values that helped immensely in the days when Mrs. Aphra Behn was writing her *Oroonoko,* and, on the other side

of the Channel, Mme. Scudéry[1] her romances. A little sense of the downright value of everyday fact was then a decided necessity. But today the tables have been turned. Romain Rolland complains that most of the writers in France are journalists, and the sign of this is that they give the people what they want, and echo little more than the reactions of the crowd. Real art, if it is to be valuable, must be independent. The malady is by no means confined to France.[2]

The trouble with journalistic literature is that it seldom gives us something which we do not already know and thus it leaves us with attitudes easily available. Its revelations have about as much imaginative content, and are about as significant for an understanding of ourselves and life, as the columns of the newspaper, only they are somewhat more skillfully done. They create few new interests or let the light shine on few new values, and the thrill that accompanies such reading is only the emotive response to fact which anyone may get if he desire by a visit to places where morbidity is ministered to.

To the new variety of realism, affected on the one hand by science and on the other by the interest in journalism, there has been given the name "naturalism." It was Zola who first used the term in his novels, and defended his practice in his brilliant series of essays entitled *Le Roman Expérimental.* I think this distinction between the old tradition and the new has been best described by Stuart P. Sherman. In brief, the old writers like Fielding, Jane Austen, Thackeray, and Thomas Hardy, were in-

[1] Mme. Scudéry was something of a journalist herself and gave some excellent "personals" of important people.

[2] I think this fact is nowhere more exquisitely shown than in the sudden—is it so sudden?—preoccupation with the details of the question of sex, once said to have been forbidden. It has never been forbidden. But it was introduced only when its presence was necessary for some vital reason. Frankness is not necessarily obscenity; but obscenity is never frankness. And the difference may be illustrated thus: Juliet's nurse is one of the worst offenders in Shakespeare, her tongue is always rolling some choice salacious morsel; but it is only that the contrast with the perfect, all-inclusive love story of Juliet and Romeo may be enhanced. But people today, as always, like to dwell on the "mysteries" of sex; and the journalists at last are bold enough to offer it to them undiluted—and for its own sake. To that extent they are no better than imaginative procurers, doing it for a price. And the reading of such stories, or the seeing of them in the "movies," is only a form of indulgence for which science has a rather unattractive name. Shelley has in this connection a very good motto, one that might well be hung on editorial walls, or in the foyers of movie palaces. "Obscenity, which is ever blasphemy against the divine beauty of Life." And some modern writers are calling it Beauty!

terested in the development of character and a theory of human conduct. To them the theme of the story was as serious, in its way, as the theme of the old epic; and though they dealt in a different mode of life and made the commonplace a thing of absorbing interest, yet in the play of relevancy and irrelevancy in their drama of life one can read a pattern and see a meaning. To the new, on the other hand, life is but an "unrestricted flow of temperament," and the motive for life is no higher than animal behavior. To it man is no longer, apparently, a moral and intellectual being, but a more cunning animal with a more skillful habit of concealing his desires. It is this loss of the human that the critic deplores in novels like those of Dreiser and Gorky. One is reminded of the saying of the French critic, St. Marc Girardin: "Formerly the imagination created saints for its legends, today it makes devils for its novels."

I can think just now of no more appropriate illustration of this new attitude than in Hauptmann's *Narr in Christo* (*The Fool in Christ*). It is the story of a half-witted fanatic who fancies himself a second Messiah, and of his futile gestures in an unwelcome world. The old mediæval ideal of sanctity is of course out of date. Saint Francis today might be a fool, and Christ himself an irrelevancy—to us. But the artist, the person who can in his thought transcend the limitations of the present, can still see in the lives of these two great men the pattern of something sweetly human. Hauptmann's Fool is a fool indeed and no more. It is a piece of journalistic caricature done by a person with a scientific background and imagination. It is accurate, but it is without meaning. It has the sense of fact, but its facts are but the débris of a laboratory.

As a result we have today in fiction, as well as in the drama, a realism of a new type, and an accuracy of documentation that is amazingly complete. I am reminded of a story related by Hegel of a painter who once showed a Turk a picture of a fish he had painted. "Are you not afraid," inquired the Oriental, "that this fish will rise up against you at the Last Day and denounce you for having created a body without a soul?" Exactly.

It is this lack of soul which likewise also distresses us. Life is in itself meaningless and monstrous, and we pluck it without a sense of its value.

> Fruit life brings to mankind, but seldom it hangs
> Red on the twig and gay, an apple smiling in reach.[1]

It is the duty of art and hence of fiction to give it this color that makes it significant. Our science and our new industries have given us a prosaic age, perhaps, with new facts that must be assimilated and new meanings and new values that must be discovered. Sheer documentation of these facts may be valuable, as a scientist's research, but it is not art; and the novels that only show us ourselves as we already know ourselves are not great literature. This has been said many times by ancients and moderns; but modern readers who get their thrill from the latest "cross section of life" need ever to be reminded of the truth that there is a difference between a bewilderment by life and an adjustment to life; and that a novel that leaves one with a sense of bewildered loss is not a good novel; it is not even art.[2]

It was in these words that Sainte-Beuve described the effect of a good work of art. It is "more luminous than the commonplace of life; more lovely and more beautiful—the thing in short which is called the ideal." It is this idea, or ideal, which gives meaning and significance to the facts of life which the artist must select—for art is always a selection. "I gaze," writes Thomas Mann, "into an unborn, unregulated world that demands to be ordered, shaped; I behold the formless shadows of human figures beckoning to me to evoke, to free them; tragic figures, ridiculous figures, and some that are both at once—and for these last I care most of all." [3]

When fiction restricts its gaze only to fact, and that the base

[1] Schiller.

[2] I can think of nothing more appropriate here than the saying of Schiller: "All art is dedicated to joy. . . . The right art is that alone which creates the highest enjoyment." There is also this in Coleridge: "If there be likeness to nature without any check of difference, the result is disgusting, and the more complete the delusion, the more loathsome the effect. Why . . . are waxworks of men and women so disagreeable?" All great critics from Aristotle to our time have added their warning. See Scott-James, *Making of Literature*, pp. 142-143.

[3] From *Tonio Kröger*.

and ugly, never guessing or pretending to guess at the meaning of it all, or what human life means today with its multiplicity of interests, when it can never discover a generous spark that is not at once futile and foolish; is not it doing as vivid and vital a wrong to human nature as the Puritan or mediæval ascetics ever did, and is not its work a new variety of asceticism, but diabolic or bestial instead of religious? Life is a home, not a hotel; and to make ourselves at home requires more than to take stock of our environment and check our belongings; we must make them ours and lend them the value of human personality.

Yet the new realism has done and is doing us a very real service. With its new methods of observing fact and its avid curiosity, it is like the research scientist gathering material which we must accommodate into our human world. We are thereby just so much richer, if we will learn how to use our riches. The bitter and disillusioned bewilderment with which we now gaze about us at these new stocks to which we have fallen heir, and which we yet somehow have not learned to use, will be dispelled perhaps only when there comes to us again the spirit of comedy. The best antidote for the state of mind of much of present-day fiction is a generous gift of comic humor. Who will be the Aristophanes or the Molière of the twentieth century?

It seems inevitable, then, to conclude that a large portion of fiction—no matter what its value may be as an exact study of life—lies outside of the realm of art. There will always be a large demand for such journalistic or scientific enterprise, as there always has been; the avidity with which the yellow journals and the tabloid are snatched need leave us with no delusions. Such things are merely the substitute for what in a less resourceful age went under the name of gossip; and, as such, criticism has with them only a secondary duty—to label them and pass on.

When it approaches art, the novel must contemplate life, as the epic once did, with a higher understanding and definite attitude. It is not enough to say that a book reflects life—so does a wax figure; nor that it knows life—so does any man of the world; but to achieve art, the experience of the writer of fiction must have

found an intelligible pattern in life, and then have wrought with the "formless shadows of human figures," "the tragic figures, the ridiculous figures" until they take on form and reveal in their groupings the significance of this pattern. It is for this reason that Arnold Bennett has said that "every novel should have a main theme that can be summed up in ten words." For the central thought of the author can be summed up without great difficulty in no great number of words. Fielding in *Tom Jones,* Thackeray in *Henry Esmond,* George Eliot in *Adam Bede,* Hardy in *The Return of the Native,* Meredith in *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*—all these, each according to his own light, has made a study of character as it affects the fundamental problem of human conduct; and the result in each can be gathered into the compass of a narrow sentence.

But thus to understand the purpose of the author, that is, to approach his work from the angle he approached life, is not yet to pronounce judgment on the value of his pattern. The question of judging a novel is not different from that of judging an epic or any other form of literary art. Virgil is greater than the unknown author of the *Chanson de Roland,* for though each is a poem of lofty devotion to an unselfish cause, the *Æneid* touches life at more points, raises more vital problems, brings within compass a larger number of conflicting motives, plunges far more deeply into the meaning of complex human personality, than was within the scope of the simple and direct imagination of the later poet. Æneas is Rome with its manifold culture. Roland is early mediæval Europe with its single faith and feudal loyalty.

Similarly, one may judge of a work of prose fiction by the author's vision of life. To what extent has he succeeded in weaving into intelligibility the conflicts and bewilderments that go to make up the flux of life? In one way his task is more difficult than was that of the epic poets, for they had at hand the old legends and myths to which they could lend significance and present value. The novelist today has turned his back on all this epic material and throws his net into the stream of life itself, looking for meaning in the commonplace of daily incident. He has like-

wise turned his back on the magic of the imagery of poetry, and must so handle fact that by its cumulative effect he may achieve a miracle and make prose do for the imagination what is more readily done by poetry. Is it to be wondered at, now when everyone fancies he can write, and presses must be kept busy, and all must read, that of the multitude of daily offerings only a scant few deserve even a first reading?

We judge by comparison with such works of fiction as show the larger scope of imaginative understanding of life, works like those of Tolstoy or Hardy, Thackeray or Balzac. To be sure, in this art, yet in its youth, there are no supreme masters as in the drama or the epic. Perhaps because of its very discursiveness there can never be a Dante or Milton of prose. These are objections that are somewhat beside the mark. The range of Hardy, though he limits the background of his stories to an obscure corner of England, is a large portion of human nature; and the same is even more convincingly true of the Russian. Into the experience of reading *Anna Karenina* what a wealth of motives have entered, from humor to stark tragedy, and the whole conflict of our day of reason and tottering faith. Yet out of the complex he has woven his pattern, the thing that is the rich personality of the author. It is against a background like this, and others as great, that the new work should be brought. Longinus once advised the aspiring poet or orator to ask "what sort of hearing would Homer or Demosthenes have given to this?" It is still a pertinent question.

Chapter XVI

CONCLUSION

VALUE OF CRITICISM—THE CRITIC A CREATOR OF VALUES—DANGER OF MEDIOCRITY—LITERARY JUDGMENT—THE PURPOSE OF ART.

HERE at the end of this book we find ourselves faced by the question with which we started—the place of criticism in modern life and letters. For we have seen that it involves something more than the "ascetic" business of pronouncing judgment —I take the word from that most genial and readable of French critics, Jules Lemaître—and what critics of the past century have been more genial and more readable than the French, and perhaps Lemaître most of all? What is the secret of his charm? Why is it, though we may not agree with his method, or even at times with his final attitude toward an author, that there can never be any question of the value of his own work? And here we have a paradox; the critic's judgment may be fallible, but the good critic's worth may yet be unquestioned. There is at least one more interesting exploration to be made before we lay this book aside.

The orthodox idea of the critic is that of an "unmitered pope"—the phrase is Sainte-Beuve's—a literary censor, like the serene fault-finder whom Horace describes in the *de Arte Poetica,* a kindly but yet birched pedagogue who knows when not to spoil the child. A "secretary of the public," but yet a "secretary who does not take orders," he is the authority of taste for a careless and decadent world. In his best moments, in this rôle, he is like a "confidential book-seller" who can make out a list of books for a hurried traveler wanting to spend the hours of his journey

agreeably. But he has also a spice of malice; and this too is valuable; for according to Dryden, "certainly a severe critic is the greatest help to a good wit," for "his malice keeps a poet within those bonds, which the luxuriancy of his fancy would tempt him to over-leap."

Usually, however, the critic is far more genial, and he may even on occasion abdicate his throne. "To lend freshness to things known," writes Sainte-Beuve in one of his earlier essays, "to spread knowledge of things new; an excellent program for a critic." Or again, "Criticism, so far as I am concerned, . . . is the pleasure of knowing men of genius, not of giving them orders." Professor Saintsbury has quoted approvingly another of his sayings: "To read; to understand; to love;—and then facilitate reading, understanding, and loving on the part of others—these are the first and second great commandments of the critic." But this geniality may go even further and be associated with a charming guilelessness. In marked contrast to the moralizing seekers after excellence in his own day, the author of *Don Quixote* put these words into his hero's mouth: "There is no book so bad but some good may be found in it . . . and therefore I could wish these censurers would be more merciful and less scrupulous, and not dwell ungenerously upon small spots, that are in a manner but so many atoms on the face of the clear sun which they murmur at."

There is even something of the attitude of modern pedagogy in this wholesale tolerance and belief in the divinity that lies hidden even in the most unpromising. Coleridge had moments when he felt the same way: "To the young I would remark that it is always unwise to judge of anything by its defects; the first attempt ought to be to discover its excellencies." Both Coleridge and Cervantes had felt the heavy hand of hostile criticism, and their fight against prejudice had made them tolerant. Another such figure, a great man in his day—almost forgotten now, more's the pity—is the Frenchman Diderot, the contemporary of Rousseau and Voltaire, and one of the originators of the great *Encyclopedia*. It is Sainte-Beuve again who approvingly writes of

him, saying that he had never met a wicked man or a bad book; "for if the book were bad, he recreated it, and, quite unconsciously, imparted to the author some of his own inventions. He found the gold in the crucible, for like the alchemist, he had put it there himself." This was in the day when Rousseau's doctrine of the natural goodness of man had yet many followers.

But behind this naïve generosity, and behind the tolerance and geniality, the old criticism had its iron. Though the critic must be without prejudice and belong to no clique, yet he must have that *"irritabilité de bon sens et de raison,"* that can "say *no* with vehemence." He must go yet further, for "no" is not so difficult sometimes to say as "yes." For when reason and good sense are against him, the critic must also be able to say "this is good, though I do not like it."

This is one side of the story, the critic concerned with the excellence or the shortcomings of a book or author. But contrast with this a passage I take from one of Lemaître's essays: "It is doubtless in the form of criticism that a writer, in his concerns with original people of our time and of other centuries, is best permitted the expression of any general ideas or significant sentiments he may think he has on the most interesting and important topics." Here the critic professedly goes outside of the author and book he may be immediately concerned with, and proceeds to exploit himself and his own ideas. But when we come to think about it, this is precisely what all original criticism has done. For in criticism ideas meet ideas and mingle, the author's and the critic's, and there will be times, not a few, when the line between them will be shadowy indeed. The critic himself must be an original creator of values; that is, what he does has a value of its own, not distinct perhaps from the value of the work he is interpreting, but something his own personality has struggled with and accepted, and something which, like the author, he is anxious to communicate. The critic is in his way also a creator, and criticism an art; and the sign of this is the unexpected gold we find in the crucible, for it is the critic who has put it there himself—if he be a good critic. It is in this fact, I believe, that

we shall find the solution of the paradox with which we began this chapter.

Why do people read journals and books of criticism? Why do they read book reviews? I believe it is safe to answer: with a motive not greatly different from that which prompts the reading of a poem or a novel, not to be instructed, but to deepen their experience of life, or, in a word, because they are interested. Nor is the play of ideas in the processes of ingenious thought any less interesting than the play of fancy in a story or drama. As a literary diversion they read criticism, when it is readable. This is the conclusion of Émile Faguet, one of the most readable of critics, and one who ought to know the secret of his power. It is only in this indirect manner, through the stimulus of interest, that criticism, like literature and art, has the ability to sustain or to raise the standards of literary merit—only by having that merit itself. Hence it is often true that a critical artist, whose critical attitude we may find quite unacceptable, may have other merits and other values that attract us; and in these we may discover the bit of gold put in by the alchemist. It is in this way also that criticism, when it is well done, offers us something of far more significance than the vehement "no" of an ascetic or censor; for it is the revelation of the critic's way of looking at life; and a critic like this is also an artist, and his criticism a work of art.

For the critic's task of interpreting an author and pointing out values is very different from the dry analytic thing we so frequently picture. There are a multitude of interests to be satisfied before he can feel that he knows the man and the work he has been studying. It is precisely in this connection that Taine's suggestion acquires value—that one can only know a person accurately by studying his race, epoch, and environment. Even a supreme genius is never free of the ties, most of them at first invisible, that bind him to his people, his country, the city that gave him his name, his interests, and his language. Shakespeare is Elizabethan; Milton, English Puritan; Goethe, romantic Germany; Dante, mediæval Florence and Italy. It is the care which

he gave to those errant details in a man's life, details such as most would overlook, that lent to Sainte-Beuve's "literary portraits" the charm and the value they will always possess. His interest called him to the most intimate study of the inner and outer biography of the sitter for the portrait. It is only thus that he felt he could know the motives that found expression in the works. And these motives, when he had captured them, these *traits saillantes,* were like a clue, a formula, which when discovered made the complexity of a man's life and work intelligible. But the discovery of these, and then the reconstruction of the now intelligible portrait, is a work of creative art.

All criticism, whether it concerns itself with the life and character of the author or purely with that portion of it that lies like a foundation under the surface of his work, is a matter of analysis and reconstruction. Victor Giraud thus describes the method of Émile Faguet:

> M. Faguet begins with a somewhat rapid biographical and bibliographical study of his author. Then he closets himself for a time with the works of the writer whom he proposes to study: he reads carefully, in any edition, taking notes, but above all, he attempts to assimilate as completely as possible all the substance of the printed work. That done, he closes the book, and he ponders; he analyses the impressions his reading has made upon him; he compels himself to get before him as exact a picture as possible of the intellectual and moral personality of the man whose writings he is reading; he carries back to their first causes the complex impression he has received; he tries to get at their heart, to see in their details the delicate workings of their temperament, of their character, and finally when he has carried all these questions to their source, when he thinks he has seen and understood, when the inner image is clear and distinct, then, with his eyes fixed on this image, he tries to put it on paper; he reconstructs, in a manner, for our eyes, as he conceives them, the mind, the thought, the work. After an analysis he reconstructs.

Is it to be wondered at that a work done with this care and this art should be interesting and compelling—if it be done by a genius? But to do this, to be able to sound the depths of an

author's experience, to discover in it a clue, to make plain the significance of his ideas, to set these forth attractively and at the same time justly, to bring to bear upon them a power of judgment sane, dispassionate and genial, this is creative art as valuable as any, and at the same time requiring a discipline of the imagination as well as of the judgment not easy to acquire.[1]

Such a critic will not be satisfied with mediocrity either in himself or others. It is part of the curse of each age that the so-called popular, the second-hand views of things and attitudes toward life, should be so easy to acquire and so hard to free oneself of. And with us today the curse rests with a weight never felt before, because of the all-pervasive influence of mediocrity, the popular journalist and publicist, the paper or the person that can say easy and popular things with conviction, the magazines with their millions of readers that give the easy commonplace the grateful aroma of inspiration. And he that would protest has little opportunity of hearing his own voice. This gives a note of very real grief to many passages in Romain Rolland.

> He read in it the signs of a worn-out generation which relegates to others the business of regarding life—feeling vicariously. And, to go farther, it seemed to him not a little shameful that they could not even see with their own eyes the reflection of life, but must have yet more intermediaries, reflections of the reflections—the critics. At best they ought to have seen to it that the reflections were true. But the critics reflected nothing but the uncertainty of the mob that moved round them. They were like those trick mirrors which reflect again and again the faces of the sight-seers who gaze into them against a painted background.

Though this is not a pretty picture—it belongs rather to our atrabiliar moods—yet it is not far from what one might expect. So long as there is a mediocre literature and art, so long there will also be a mediocre criticism; and it will require no little imagination and judgment to distinguish the spurious from the genuine. In reality it is against precisely the spurious that Tol-

[1]August Boeckh, the German philologist, has it that the appreciative critic must know his author better even than the author knows himself.

stoy's *What Is Art?* is a protest. What he there calls false art and false criticism is in reality often only a thing that has lost the spontaneous zest of genuine experience. Though we may not agree with his final restriction of the highest form of art to the simplest routine of "unspoiled" life, we should never fail to do justice to his real merit, his insistence upon the need of sincerity. "The artist should be impelled by an inner necessity to express his feelings."

But we have missed the chief significance of the critic's function if we think of him only as the qualified reader and the qualified interpreter of the ideas of others. For even the most careless of reading or the most ephemeral of writing can never quite disassociate itself from the question of value. The final judgment of the critic accordingly will inevitably, if he remain sincere, turn on this all-important matter. Notwithstanding the present *nolo episcopari* of many theories that deny the right to the critic to go beyond the single work he is reading, the critic is an "unmitered pope," his realm is the tradition of letters, and his office, as Longinus long ago pointed out, "the last and crowning fruit of long experience," so that even his *obiter dicta* have in them something of plenary power. He will, if he be a true critic, by nature as well as training, have an admiration for classic excellence, and according to its presence or absence in a work under his hand he will pronounce judgment.

Too often this admiration has been interpreted as a dull reverence for the classic past and an unwillingness to engage in new adventures in the present, as though tradition were a fetter that straitened his imagination and withheld from him the panorama of life. On the contrary, his fastidiousness of taste is no mental inertness, but an "attentiveness of mind," as Pater puts it, that is "a kind of religious duty and service." He will know human nature and human life, inner and outer, better perhaps than his fellows, for has he not also seen it at its best in the humane tradition of letters? But the very excellence of this tradition will keep him from having his heart on his sleeve, and judgment at the solicitation of every passing whim.

It is no easy matter to enter into the company of the best minds and to feel at home in the great tradition, "mankind's memory of the past." Not a dull memory of names and works, nor to be gained by casual reading; the past to one who knows it thus only in its fossils, is not a memory but an idol. Nor does love of tradition mean a blind following of predecessors, no matter how great. I can't do better than quote here from T. S. Eliot's *Sacred Wood* a passage used by Mr. Scott-James:

> If the only form of tradition, of handing down, consisted in following the ways of the immediate generation before us in a blind or timid adherence to its successes, "tradition" should positively be discouraged. We have seen many such simple currents soon lost in the sand; and novelty is better than repetition. Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labor. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to any one who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.

If such a knowledge of the past is necessary to the poet, it is doubly so to the critic who would judge his work and not be ashamed. For in this sense he lives in the past as well as in the present; and he knows the present better than those less favored in understanding, for his is the wider and more sustained vision. He will, moreover, because of this larger perspective remain unmoved before the lesser spectacles and the irrelevancies on which others may set great store. His judgments likewise will be more sound, because they are made by comparison with what is relevant both in the past and the present and always with a consciousness of the ideal of the good life to which great literature strives to minister. It is this largeness of outlook and this fas-

tidious taste for the best that lend to good literary criticism its value.

Earlier in this book we accepted tentatively Tolstoy's definition of "Art," a thing that concerns us now, as we have called criticism a creative activity. It would take a large book to hold all the definitions that have been offered, and a poet's imagination to follow the imagery with which some are set forth. Here is one, for example, I have under my hand, by Romain Rolland:

> Art is to grasp life, as an eagle its prey, to bear it up into the air, to rise with it into the serenity of space. . . . To do that, a man needs talons, great wings, and a mighty heart. . . . Art is not a mean pasturage, free to the wretched passer-by. A pleasure, certainly, and the most intoxicating of all. But it is the reward only of a desperate struggle, and its laurel-wreath crowns the victory of strength. Art is life tamed, the emperor of life. To will to be Cæsar, a man must have the soul for it.

All this may be mightily true sometimes, with some varieties of art, great as well as small. There are, however, also some great experiences like the tides, to use obvious imagery ourselves, which are so calm, so imperceptible, in their manner of possession, that we are unaware of their approach, and never quite conscious of their power. And further it is certain that some of the more thoughtful critics, like Walter Pater for example, remind us last of all of the eagle seizing its prey; so delicate, so deliberate, and yet so sure is their approach to their theme, and so satisfying.

Tolstoy's definition is better at least, in that it allows for these quieter experiences of life that are yet worth communicating: "Art is a human activity, consisting in this, that one man consciously, by means of external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that other people are infected by these feelings, and also experience them." Yet there is also something lacking in this, at least in its wording, that Tolstoy most indubitably would recognize. For art has primarily a very definite relation to values. We can put away all such definitions as would disassociate art from all practical values; for example, this one by

Jane Harrison: art springs "from perceptions and emotions that have somehow not found immediate outlet in practical action," for we should have a good deal of difficulty trying to find a workable definition of "practical."

I think we can hazard as a safe definition the one I have had in mind when I have used the word in its many applications: art is the perception and communication of value in experience. It is this value that is always its unexpectedness and its charm; it is this that gives it significance. It is precisely in this sense that I use the word when I speak of literary criticism as an art; for it is first and last a discovery of values in literature. First to discover them himself in his own experience, then to interpret them sympathetically to others, to love the old and tried, to welcome the new, to be as generous in his affections as wise in his dislikes, these are the duties and the privilege of the art of the critic. It is a responsibility as well as a pleasure, a responsibility that the critic shares with every other writer, and carries, too, a warning:

> Thou under stress of the strife
> Shall hear for sustainment supreme,
> The cry of the conscience of life:
> "Keep the young generation in hail,
> And bequeath them no tumbled house."

Appendix I

BIBLIOGRAPHY

The bibliography below makes no pretense to completeness. Its aim is to provide adequate supplementary reading on the general problem of critical reading and on the specific phases of the problem as they are raised in the several chapters. The list is far longer than any possible course of reading could require, and in most cases only appropriate chapters of the books named are relevant. A glance at their tables of contents or indexes will reveal what the reader wants. Naturally, many books are listed under the caption "General" which would likewise raise questions which are discussed in the later chapters, but it would serve no useful purpose to repeat their titles.

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CHAPTERS II AND III

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Appendix II

SUGGESTIONS FOR STUDY

It would be gratuitous, I believe, for an author of a book like this to offer advice on how it may be used by a student. Yet a word or two may save some needless experimenting and waste of time. The bibliography offers a wide range of readings of critics and others which can supplement the argument of the text or offer contradictory opinions. These last, I might suggest, may be read with beneficial results. A clash of opinion is an opportunity which the wise instructor should welcome. The student should read in connection with a book like this some of the work of the world's greatest critics—notably the thought of such masters as Aristotle (who was never more in history than today), Longinus, Horace, Dante (*de Vulgari Eloquentia,* translated and available today), Dryden, Wordsworth, Shelley, Arnold, Lessing, Sainte Beuve—the list can be extended indefinitely down to our own day. It is only in the light of this long tradition that one can appreciate the work of modern critics like T. S. Eliot, Canby or Sherman. Such a reading will reveal at least one thought: that our newest revolutionaries are not so unorthodox in their manner of rebellion as some are tempted at times to think.

Chapters I and II of the book are introductory, frankly stating the problems and offering only the suggestions offhand that are later discussed in fuller detail. They should therefore be read rather rapidly. Chapter III has a difficult theme. It was impossible to avoid it, or to put it later. Here the wise student will supplement his reading with a brief excursion into some of the rudiments of psychology and æsthetics. To grasp the meaning of "form" is not easy; and at times what looks like the simplest of "form"—for example, a Greek statue or a Greek tragedy—will show on examination the most complex nature. Carefully selected readings from the best of poetry, in an anthology like the *Golden Treasury,* for example, will be of value. The

growing interest and understanding of a more difficult poem—let us say one of John Donne's—will clearly reveal the whole significance of the mental process.

At this point a digression may be allowed. I have always felt that in matters such as literary appreciation and judgment, the mass frontal attack by lectures to large classes is productive of splendid opportunities for brilliant speakers and the applause of fluttered audiences, but it does little that is morally convincing. Small groups meeting under as informal conditions as possible, and discussing difficulties and problems, with the most flexible program, accomplish vastly more lasting results. In a place of difficulty like Chapter III an instructor can readily select from modern or traditional poetry and prose examples for group study or, what is better, encourage the students to plunder literature and bring in their own booty, as a test of their lifting ability.

For the study of *Style and Imagery* there is no need to offer suggestions. Here is where supplementary reading is most valuable, both of standard critics and the so-called modernists. Anthologies abound, notably such as *Harper's Anthology: Prose* and *Poetry,* or Palgrave's; and any of the half dozen modern anthologies, like Untermeyer's; or if one would go farther, Carl Van Doren's *Anthology of World Poetry*. I would suggest the use of just such collections for the adequate study of Chapters VI, VII, and VIII. In these the questions also of larger poems and prose works are raised, but these can be postponed until the study of Part II.

In the chapters on value and greatness, abundant opportunities for pertinent discussion are offered by the selection of passages from critics. For example, the following, reporting one of Pascal's comments, and printed in his *Pensées:*

L'éloquence est un art de dire les choses de telle façon; 1, que ceux à qui l'on parle puissent les entendre sans peine et avec plaisir; 2, qu'ils s'y sentent intéressés, en sorte que l'amour-propre les porte plus volontiers à y faire réflexion.

Elle consiste donc dans une correspondance qu'on tache d'établir entre l'esprit et le coeur de ceux à qui l'on parle d'un côté, et de l'autre les pensées et les expressions dont on se sert; ce qui suppose qu'on aura bien étudié le coeur de l'homme pour en savoir tous les ressorts, et pour trouver ensuite les justes proportions du discours

qu'on veut y assortir. Il faut se mettre à la place de ceux qui doivent nous entendre, et faire essai sur son propre coeur du tour qu'on donne a son discours, pour voir si l'un est fait pour l'autre, et si l'on peut s'assurer que l'auditeur sera comme forcé de se rendre. Il faut se renfermer, le plus qu'il est possible, dans le simple naturel; ne pas faire grand ce qui est petit, ni petit ce qui est grand. Ce n'est pas assez qu'une chose soit belle, il faut qu'elle soit propre au sujet, qu'il n'y ait rien de trop ni rien de manque.

Chapters IX and X are frankly only essays by the way on questions a literary critic is only too apt to raise, resulting in the confession of his own limitations. Yet the questions will also arise for the least penetrating of readers, and our traditional academic attitude is to allow them to go unanswered. So far as concerns the theory of criticism, they are beside the mark; but so far as concerns every reader's attitude toward modern life, they are an ever-present challenge. The author, in a case like this, offers his suggestion and hopes that wise readers will pursue the inquiry farther.

Part II is the place for a more detailed study of literature, under the suggestions offered as each type is described and its standards of excellence discussed. The tragedies, comedies, lyrics, essays, epics, and novels to be read will have to be determined by circumstances; but read a representative list must be, if the chapters are to have any value.

Supplementary reading is suggested, and all of it is valuable; but it is to the works of literature themselves that approach must be made. Only thus can any careful attitude of literary judgment or taste be expected to be won.

The connection between Part I and Part II is close but not too close. Each can be used by itself and no large sense of loss felt. Part I deals with the theme of literary judgment in general; Part II, with judgment of the various types of literature. In order that the two parts may be read separately there is some slight overlapping in the subject matter and, once or twice, in reference to models. This could hardly be avoided.

INDEX

OF SUBJECTS AND NAMES

Abercrombie, L., on greatness, 159
Addison, J., 390; essays of, 351; *Sir Roger de Coverley,* 288
Æneas Sylvius, on value, 139
Æschylus, 111; *Agamemnon,* 168, 244, 263, 269, 274, 275, 278; *Prometheus,* 202, 259, 269, 274, 275, 279; *Seven Against Thebes,* 259
Æsthetic distance, 54
Allusion, 105 f.
Amiel, H. F., *Journal,* 335
Anatole France, 3, 16; on taste, 36; on value, 125, 130 f.; *Penguin Island,* 299; *Rotisserie de la Reine Pédauque,* 71
Anderson, S., *Dark Laughter,* 240
Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso,* 361
Aristophanes, 13; *Frogs,* 285; *Knights,* 285; on the critic, 4, 13; rhythm, 96; satire in, 298; value of, 311
Aristotle, classification of types, 234; definition of rhythm, 97; law of the probable and the necessary, 85; on art, 146; on character, 172; on characters in tragedy and comedy, 246; on comedy, 288 f.; on style, 80; on symbols, 28; on the epic, 361; on the incommunicable, 91; on tragedy, 269 f.; on tragedy and comedy, 241 f.; *Poetics,* 270; *Poetics* and *Rhetoric,* 15; poetry and prose, 88, 90; poetry and history, 59; science and poetry, 216
Arnold, Matthew, 3, 131; on the immortal phrase, 150; on style, 78; *Scholar Gypsy,* 215
Art, definition of, 405 f.; Tolstoy's definition of, 37
Aucassin and Nicolette, 142

Babbitt, I., *New Laocoön,* 21
Bacon, Sir F., essays, 323, 351 f.; greatness in prose, 165 f.
Ballads, 342
Balzac, H. de, 388; *Comédie Humaine,* 287; *Père Goriot,* 247
Barbier, A., *Dante,* 32
Barrie, J., *Admirable Crichton,* 286
Batteux, Ch., 270; definition of epic, 365
Baudelaire, C., on symbols, 77
Beautiful, the, and the ugly, 136 f.
Behn, Aphra, *Oroonoko,* 390
Bennett, Arnold, 394
Beowulf, 244, 300; not a primitive poem, 372; value of, 375 f.
Bergson, H., on comic character, 306; on laughter, 292 f.
Bhagavat Gita, 257
Birkhoff, G. D., *The Origin, Nature and Influence of Relativity,* 225
Blake, W., difficulties in, 33; *Love's Secret,* 8
Boccaccio, 9; *Novelle,* 300
Boeckh, A., 402; on *genres,* 247
Boiardo, M. M., *Orlando Innamorato,* 361
Boileau-Despréaux, N., criticism of epic, 364; definition of epic, 365; *Le Lutrin,* 384; on comedy, 295; on fictions, 383; on poetry, 217; on

tragedy, 241; on value, 127; on words, 93; supernatural in the epic, 371
Bombast, 192; in Browning, 52
Boswell, J., *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides,* 350
Brontë, Charlotte and Emily, 36; Emily, *Wuthering Heights,* 148
Brooke, R., 349; *The Voice,* 151
Browne, Sir Thomas, 34, 165; rhythm, 98; value of, 357
Browning, R., *Childe Roland,* 160; *Home Thoughts,* 336, *Incident of the French Camp,* 342; minor poems, 159; obscurity in, 27; rhythm, 104; *My Last Duchess,* 160 f.; *Rabbi Ben Ezra,* 336; *Ring and the Book,* 249; *Saul,* 204
Brunetière, F., 14, 131; definition of lyric, 326; *L'Evolution des Genres,* 235 f.; on value, 125 f.
Buffon, G. L. L., on style, 79
Burns, R., *Tam o'Shanter,* 287, 342
Burton, R., *Anatomy of Melancholy,* 351
Butcher, S. H., 307
Buti, F. da, on tragedy, 250
Butler, S., *Hudibras,* 384
Byron, Lord, *Don Juan,* 288; *On His Thirty-third Birthday,* 153

Canby, H. S., 3
Canzone, 345
Carlyle, T., essays of, 352 f.; poetry in, 88
Carriere, M., definition of lyric, 326
Carroll, Lewis, 91
Carruth, W. H., *Each in His Own Tongue,* 189
Cervantes, M. de, as a critic, 398; as the originator of a *genre,* 383 f.; Don Quixote on literature and life, 144; on art, 146
Character and personality in literature, 171 f.
Chateaubriand, F., poetry in, 88
Chaucer, G., 175; Canterbury pilgrims, 61; *Canterbury Tales,* 299; *Sir Tophas,* 384
Chekov, A., on imagery, 93
Chenier, A., on the elegy, 345
Chesterton, G. K., essays of, 359
Cicero, *Letters,* 322
Cid, the, 361
Clay Cart, The, 303
Coleridge, S. T., as a critic, 398; definition of figures, 118; definition of the imagination, 152; definition of taste, 146; on bombast, 52; on the elegy, 346; on humor, 294; on rhythm, 97; on science, 216; on Shakespeare, 175; on taste and value, 128; on the critic, 4, 14; on value, 135; *Rime of the Ancient Mariner,* 111, 342
Collins, W., *Ode to Simplicity,* 345
Comedy, 245 f.; as a social relief, 318; classification of, 296 f.; comedy in India, 302 f.; definition of, 299; farce, 300 f.; generalizing power of, 307 f.; idea in, 312 f.; irony in, 315 f.; katharsis in, 289; of humor, 306 f.; of incident, 299 f.; of personality, 304 f.; plot in, 316; range of, 285 f.; requirements of, 310 f.; romantic comedy and romantic novel, 302; serious, 308; Shakespeare's idea of, 313 f.; stock characters in, 304 f.; the unities, 301; value of, 310 f.; value of farce, 318; wit in, 308 f.
Comic laughter, 289 f.
Commedia dell'Arte, 307
Congreve, W., *Way of the World,* 300
Corneille, P., *Le Cid,* 244, 250; *Le Menteur,* 300; on the comic intrigue, 300; tragedy, 282
Cowley, A., essays of, 350; *On Hope,* 328; *Wit,* 154
Criticism, and readers, 9; as an art, 399 f.; criticism and judgment, 403 f.; criticism and morals, 14; danger of mediocrity, 402 f.; dogmatic, 11; genial, 398; place of,

397; schools of, 10; the critic's scholarship, 400 f.
Croce, B., 10, 16; "Expression," 71; expression and communication, 73; expressionism and value, 135 f.; on taste, 37; on types, 237; the intuition, 67
Cuckoo Song, 337

D'Annunzio, G., tragedy in, 280
Dante, Alighieri, 4, 17, 175, 176; *canzoni,* 345; *Divine Comedy,* 287, 360, 366, 373; epic value of, 377 f.; examples of greatness, 163; *Inferno,* 62; lyrics, 247, 327 f.; misconceptions of, 32; on science, 216; *Paradiso,* 195, 244, 245; poetry in, 85; prose in, 88; simplicity of, 92; tragedy of Paolo and Francesca, 252
Darwin, C., 165
David's lament over Saul, diction in, 109
Deborah, Song of, 254
Defoe, D., 390; *Robinson Crusoe,* 85
Democracy in art, 349
De Quincey, T., 3, 5, 357 f.; essays, 352; on style, 79; poetry in, 88; rhythms in, 99
De Sanctis, F., 348; on the imagination, 152
Descartes, René, 209
Deschamps, Eustache, *Virelay,* 338
Dickens, C., contrasted with Thackeray, 33; novels, 389
Diction, 109 f.; purity in, 112
Diderot, D., on comedy, 307
Dilthey, W., on value, 139
Dixon, M., definition of epic, 365; on tragedy, 264
Dogmatism, theory of, 124, 125 f.
Donne, J., elegies, 346; *Goe and catch a falling star,* 26; *Hymn to God,* 342; *The Ectasy,* 154
Dostoevski, F., *Crime and Punishment,* 251; social novels, 389
Dreiser, T., 392; *American Tragedy,* 10, 145
Drinkwater, J., *Reciprocity,* 340; *The Wood,* 341
Dryden, J., *Alexander's Feast,* 44; on the critic, 398; on the epic, 362
Dumas, A., 387
Dwight, T., *Columbiad, Conquest of Canaan,* 361

Ecclesiasticus, 353
Echegaray, 389
Eddington, A. S., *Nature of the Physical World,* 225 f.
Elegy, 345 f.
Eliot, G., 390, *Adam Bede,* 244, 395; essays of, 352; on laughter, 291
Eliot, T. S., on the lyric, 330; on lyric poetry, 340; *Sacred Wood,* 404
Emerson, R. W., essays, 352; on value of comedy, 319
Emotion in poetry, 50 f.
Emotive attitude of poetry, 66 f.
Epic, authentic and literary, 372; characters in, 369; definition of, 363 f.; difficulties to be overcome, 362 f.; epic material, 373 f.; epic material in the Bible, 373; future possibilities, 380; manner of Virgil, Homer, Milton, 363; number of, 360 f.; plot of, 368 f.; poetry in, 380 f.; popularity of, 360; scope of, 364 f.; supernatural in, 370 f.; value of, 374 f.
Epictetus, *Moral Discourses, Enchiridion,* 322
Epigram, 153
Epstein, 11
Erasmus, *Praise of Folly,* 354
Eschenbach, W. von, *Tristan und Iseult,* 378
Essay, as a philosophy of life, 353 f.; charm of, 355 f.; definition of, 350; early, 321; history of, 323 f.; impersonal, 352; journalism in, 358; Lamb's definition of, 355; later, 357.
Euphuism, 82

Euripides, *Alcestis,* 244, 250, 276; *Daughters of Troy,* 279; effect on tragedy, 268; *Hercules,* 279; *Medea,* 263; *Phædra,* 274
Expressionism, 134 f.

Faguet, E., 17; as a critic, 401; on obscurity, 26; on types, 235
Fielding, H., *Tom Jones,* 388, 395; the commonplace in *Tom Jones,* 78
Figures, faded, 119; of speech, 116 f.
Firdausi, Legends of Persia, 373; *Shah Nameh,* 361
Fitzgerald, E., Omar Khayyám, 43
Flaubert, G., on imagery, 93, 94; on style, 79; poetry in, 88; the commonplace in *Madame Bovary,* 78
Form, 40 f.
Free verse, 100
Freud, S., on tragedy, 278
Frye, P. H., on the lyric, 349

Galsworthy, J., 276, 388; *Forsyte Saga,* 85
Gayley, C. M., definition of epic, 366; definition of lyric, 326
Geibel, E. von, on the lyric, 320
Genres, confusion in, 240 f.; *genres tranchées,* 246
Girardin, St. Marc, 392
Giraud, V., 401
Glover R., *Leonidas,* 361
Goethe, J. W. von, 17; *Faust,* 108, 139 f., 205, 250; *Hermann und Dorothea,* 366; on the mediocre, 190; on personality, 174; on plot, 170; on subjective poetry, 335; on the unpoetic life, 56; on value, 139; *Roman Elegies,* 340; simplicity in use of symbols, 75; *Sprüche,* 64
Goldoni, C., comedies of, 316
Goldsmith, O., *Citizen of the World,* 351; *She Stoops to Conquer,* 286, 301
Good life, the, and a theory of value, 138 f.
Gosse, E., definition of lyric, 326; on the ode, 344
Gorky, M., 389
Gourmont, Remy de, 208
Gray, T., *Elegy,* 346; *Progress of Poetry,* 345
Great literature, universality of, 176 f.
Great poetry, 156 f.
Greatness in poetry, examples, 163; in longer poems, 167 f.
Greek drama, universality of, 176
Gregory, J. C., *The Nature of Laughter,* 290 f.; value of comedy, 317
Greig, J. V. T., on laughter and comedy, 295

Hamilton, G. R., epigrams, 153
Hardy, T., 388; *In the Time of the "Breaking of the Nations,"* 7; power of, 89; *Return of the Native,* 10, 71, 395; *The Dynasts,* 163
Harrison, Jane, on art, 406
Hauptmann, G., Hannele, 244; *Narr in Christo,* 392; on tragedy, 250; *Sunken Bell,* 244, 276; *Weavers,* 266, 278, 279
Havelock, 361
Hawthorne, N., *Scarlet Letter,* 251
Hazlitt, W., essays of, 351
Hebbel, F., 24
Hebrew poetry, 162; rhythm in, 98
Hegel, G. W. F., 209; definition of epic, 364; on tragedy, 262 f.
Hemans, F., *Night Blooming Flowers,* 185
Henley, W., *Invictus,* 180, 202
Herbert, G., *Jordan,* 340
Hobbes, T., definition of laughter, 292 f.
Hofmannsthal, H. von, on value, 122
Holmes, O. W., on laughter, 292
Homer, and the epic, 363; characters in, 171; comedy in, 287; epic value of, 374 f.; *Iliad,* 15; *Iliad* and *Odyssey,* 361; imagery in, 116; laughter in, 291; not a primitive poet, 372; poetry in, 87, 380 f.; religion of, 203; supernatural in, 376

Horace, (Quintus Horatius Flaccus), 4, 14; *de Arte Poetica,* 65, 241; dedicatory lyric, 342; odes, 345; on comedy, 295; on poetry, 217
Howells, W. D., 3
Hume, D., 209
Humor, 293 f.
Huxley, T., 165

Ibsen, H., 276; *Doll's House,* 287; *Ghosts,* 266; *Rosmersholm,* 251, 263, 275, f.; *Wild Duck,* 287
Imagery, 114 f.; false, 120
Images in reading, 41 f.
Imagination, the, 152 f.; poetic, 35 f.
Imaginative literature, 5; form in, 58 f.
Imagist poetry, 121
Immortal phrase, the, 149 f.; examples, 150
Impressionism, 15, 124, 129 f.; and distrust of reason, 132 f.; and science, 130 f.
Impulses, in reading, 43 f.
Incommunicable, the, 91
Individualism, 201 f.
Intuition, 67
Irony, 139 f., 160, 170; in Greek tragedy, 281 f.; in Shakespeare, 281 f.; in tragedy, 281 f.
Irving, W., essays, 352

James, H., style of, 82
James, W., 165
Job, 203; greatness in, 158 f.
Johnson, S., 10; on the essay, 350; *Rambler,* 350
Jones, L., on art, 145
Jonson, B., comedies of, 306; contrasted with Shakespeare, 34; on judgment, 147; on style, 80; *To Celia,* 153; *The Alchemist,* 300
Journalism and literature, 145
Judgment, 146 f.; of literature, 176, 177, 403 f.
Juvenal, *Satires,* 245; satiric laughter, 292

Kalidasa, *Sakuntala,* 303
Kant, I., 209
Katharsis, tragic, 272 f.
Keats, J., *Eve of St. Agnes,* 336; figures in, 118; imagery in, 115; *La Belle Dame Sans Merci,* 68; *Last Sonnet,* 70, 151, 334; *Ode to a Grecian Urn,* 331, 337; *Ode to a Nightingale,* 77, 163, 336; *On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer,* 61; protest against science, 220; rhythm in 102, 103; style of, 82
Kerr, A., 3; in impressionism, 134
Key, F. S., National Anthem, 44
Kilmer, J., *Trees,* 46
King Horn, 361
Kipling, R., allusions, in, 106; *L'Envoi,* 188
Klopstock, F., *Messiah,* 361

La Bruyère, J. de, *Caractères,* 351
Lamb, C., essays, 351 f.; *Poor Relations,* 288
Landor, W. S., *Dirce,* 154
Lang, A., *Ballade of Dead Ladies,* 339
Laughter, definition of, 289 f.; relativity of, 295
Le Bossu, R. P., definition of epic, 364; on the epic, 384
Le Brun, P. E. E., *Sur une Dame Poète,* 153
Lemaître, Jules, 3, 397; as a critic, 399; on the mediocre, 191; on Molière, 312; on minor poetry, 179; on value, 129 f.
Leonard, W. E., on taste, 37; *Two Lives,* 213
Leopardi, G., 217
Lessing, G. E., *Laocoön,* 21; *Minna von Barnhelm,* 286
Linnæus, C., 240
Lipps, Th., definition of comedy, 299
Literature and journalism, 145
Literature and life, 140 f.
Lodge, T., *Rosalinde,* 234
Longevity of great literature, 174 f.

Longfellow, H. W., *Psalm of Life,* 157; *Wreck of the Hesperus,* 5
Longinus, meaning of greatness, 49; on greatness, 156, 157; on judgment, 177, 403; on love of greatness, 149; *On the Sublime,* 162; secret of greatness, 159; tests for greatness, 174
Lope de Vega, comedies of, 301
Love of man, 200 f.
Lowell, J. R., 3
Lucas, F. L., on tragedy, 269; *Tragedy,* 251
Lucian, essays in, 322; *Sale of Creeds,* 309
Lucretius, philosophy of, 194, 223
Ludwig, E., 233
Luther, Martin, *Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott,* 180
Lyric, and great poetry, 347; and other forms of poetry, 336; definitions of, 324 f.; difficulties facing a definition, 324 f.; early, 321; impersonal, 387; impressionistic, 335 f.; in Greece, 322; in later poetry, 323; inner structure of, 336; in Shakespeare, 323; intimacy of, 347; modern, 348; personal note in, 334 f.; scope of, 337; singing quality of, 332 f.; subjective, 334 f.; themes of, 343 f.

Macaulay, T. B., 165; essays of, 352
Mackail, J. W., on the elegy, 345
Maeterlinck, M., *Pélleas et Mélisande,* 278
Mahabharata, 361, 373
Maître Pathelin, 300
Mann, T., on art, 393; novels, 390
Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations,* 322
Marivaux, P. de, *Jeu de l'Amour et du Hazard,* 286
Marlowe, C., *Doctor Faustus,* 244, *Tamburlaine,* 244
Masefield, J., *Cargoes,* 101; *Sea Fever,* 184; *Sonnet,* 212; *Tragedy of Nan,* 278
Maugham, S., *Our Betters,* 301
Maupassant, G. de, *Pierre et Jean,* 386
Menander, 304
Mencken, T., 3
Meredith, G., *Diana,* 172; on laughter and comedy, 293 f.; on value of comedy, 310 f.; *Ordeal of Richard Feverel,* 395
Metaphysical poets, 328 f.
Meter, 100 f.
Metrics, 344
Middleton, R., on the essay, 358
Millay, E. St. V., *April,* 53; *Euclid Alone,* 163
Milton, John, 175; and the epic, 363; character of Satan, 369; descriptions in, 38; examples of greatness, 163; *Hymn on the Morning of Christ's Nativity,* 334; *Il Penseroso,* 334; imagery in, 115; *L'Allegro,* 334; *Lycidas,* 346; lyrics of, 323; minor poetry, 154 f.; on laughter, 294; on the tragic katharsis, 273; *Paradise Lost,* 108, 167 f., 360, 372; rhythm, 96, 98, 99, 102, 103, 104; *Samson Agonistes,* 250; Satan, 63, 201
Molière (stage name of Jean Baptiste Poquelin), 14, 83; *Bourgeois Gentilhomme,* 173; irony in, 315 f.; *L'Avare,* 286, 307; *Les Femmes Savantes,* 300; *Malade Imaginaire,* 300; *Misanthrope,* 244, 287, 300, 305 f.; prose and poetry, 87; *Tartuffe,* 286, 300, 304 f.
Monet, Claude, 23
Montaigne, M. de., 285; *Essay on Friendship,* 166; essays of, 351 f.; on his essays, 320 f.; on judgment, 177; on literature, 144; value of, 356
Montesquieu, C., *Persian Letters,* 351
Morals, literature and, 127, 137, 144
Mueller-Freienfels, R., on value, 123
Murry, J. M., on style, 67, 84
Musset, A. de, 217
Myth and poetry, 209

Nature, love of, 197 f.
Newman, J. H., *Lead, Kindly Light,* 180, 204
Niebelungenlied, 361
Nietzsche, F., definition of lyric, 325; on tragedy, 258, 267 f., 282

Obscurity, 7, 26 f.
Ode, 344 f.
Omar Khayyám, diction in, 109; protest against science, 222; *Rubáiyat of,* 15, 158 f., 244
O'Neill, E., 276; *Emperor Jones,* 172, 278; *Hairy Ape,* 251, 266, 278

Palgrave, F., definition of lyric, 326
Panchatantra, 286
Pascal, B., on the good life, 142; on the imagination, 217; on style, 79, 82; religious attitude of, 194
Pater, W., 201; allusions in, 105 f.; on classicism, 126; on diction, 112; on humor, 294; on plot, 170; on style, 81; on taste, 403; on value, 129; rhythm, 97
Patmore, C., *The Toys,* 154
Personality, and character in literature, 171; revelation of, 173
Petrarch, F., 345
Pindar, 345
Plato, 208, 209; dialogues of, 321; on value, 123, 124; *Republic of,* 13
Plautus, 295; *Aulularia,* 286; *Captives,* 286, 300; *Menæchmi,* 301
Pleasure as value, 133 f.
Plot, 71, 170
Plutarch, essays of, 322
Poe, E. A., poetic principle, 88, 90
Poet, the, 59 f.; philosophy of life, 169 f.
Poetic diction, 110 f.
Poetry, and dogma, 208; and myth, 209; and philosophy, 207 f.; and prose, 82; and science, 214 f.; and the poem, 90; and values, 226 f.; distrust of reason, 218; form in, 58; in prose fiction, 88; mediocre, 185; subjective, 217 f.; taste for minor, 183; the theme of great, 156 f., 167 f.
Politian, A., lecture on Homer, 175
Pope, A., *Dunciad,* 297; *Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady,* 346; *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot,* 297; *Essay on Man,* 12, 337; *Imitations of Horace,* 297; on tragedy, 261; *Rape of the Lock,* 384; *Satires of,* 292
Proctor, Bryan, on Lamb, 356
Prose, and poetry, 82; greatness in, 164 f.; mediocrity in, 189; power of, 89 f.; pure, 84
Prose fiction, and the epic, 382 f.; contrasted with epic, 387 f.; effect of psychology, 387 f.; effect of science, 386 f.; influence of journalism, 390 f.; psychological novels, 389 f.; realism in, 386; scope of, 387 f.; social interest of, 388; standards of judgment, 395
Przybyszewski, *Snow,* 278
Psalm, Twenty-third, 179, 203
Pulci, L., *Morgante Maggiore,* 361

Rabelais, F., satire in, 297 f.
Racine, J., 83, 191, 244; and tragedy, 282; contrasted with Shakespeare, 283; the tragic in, 272
Raleigh, Sir W., 165
Readers and critics, 9
Reading, act of, 19 f., 40 f.
Realism, 170, 229, 386 f.; and art, 393 f.; value of, 393 f.
Religion and compensation, 204 f.
Religious experience, varieties of, 197 f.
Rhetoric, laws of, 73 f.
Rhyme, 100
Rhythm, 95 f.
Richards, I. H., 40
Roberts, W. H., *Judah Restored,* 361
Robinson, E. A., *Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford,* 64; in the epic tradition, 380; *Octaves,* 348
Rodin, A., 11, 38

Rolland, R., *Jean Christophe,* 390; on art, 405; on mediocrity, 191; on mediocrity in criticism, 402
Romance, 387
Romance of the Rose, 378
Ronsard, P. de, *Franciad,* 361, 368
Rostand, E., *Cyrano de Bergerac,* 244, 302; *Romancers,* 302
Rotrou, J., *Agésilan de Colchos,* 302
Rousseau, J. J., 191, 208; *Confessions,* 358; on tragedy, 250

Sainte-Beuve, C. A., 3, 9, 131; as a critic, 397 f.; on art, 393; on great poetry, 164; on popularity, 148; on value, 124 f.
Saintsbury, G., 10; on the lyric, 347
Sandburg, C., *Fog,* 121
Santayana, G., *An Interpretation of Religion and Poetry,* 218; on great poetry, 156; poetry and religion, 197, 205
Sappho, 50
Satire, 292 f., 296 f.; *Satire Ménippée,* 292
Scaliger, J. C., classification of types, 234; definition of figures, 116
Schiller, F., on art, 147; *Wilhelm Tell,* 244
Schnitzler, A., *Green Cockatoo, Young Medardus,* 308
Schopenhauer, A., 165; on style, 80; on tragedy, 282; theory of tragedy, 264
Science, and literature, 140; and the practical life, 226
Scott, Sir W., 387; poems of, 360; prose and poetry of, 83
Scudery, M., novels, 391
Seneca, 241
Sentimentality, 191
Shakespeare, W., 17, 45; and poetry, 83; *Antony and Cleopatra,* 263; *As You Like It,* 234, 286, 294; biography of, 35; characters in, 171 f.; *Comedy of Errors,* 234, 244, 286, 300; *Hamlet,* 263, 264, 276 f., 278, 280; wit in *Hamlet,* 310; *Henry IV,* 300; *Henry VI,* 233; *Julius Caesar,* 266, 273; *King Lear,* 247, 263, 264; late style of, 82; *Macbeth,* 263, 270, 280; *Merchant of Venice,* 247, 270; *Midsummer Night's Dream,* 286, 294, 302; *Othello,* 251, 264; *Richard III,* 263; rhythm, 96; simplicity of, 92, 112; *Sonnets,* 40, 252, 347; *Taming of the Shrew,* 234, 286; *Tempest,* 184, 302, 314 f.; tragi-comedies, 313 f.; *Twelfth Night,* 244; *When Icicles Hang by the Wall,* 341; *Winter's Tale,* 303
Shaw, G. B., 14, 295; *Androcles and the Lion,* 286, 308; *Arms and the Man,* 286; *Cæsar and Cleopatra,* 308; *Candida,* 308; *Man and Superman,* 306, 308; *Mrs. Warren's Profession,* 308; on comedy, 307; on tradition, 132; value of his comedies, 317
Shelley, P. B., 391; *Adonais,* 346; *Defense of Poetry,* 134; *Ode to the West Wind,* 181, 334; on science, 216; on science and poetry, 223; on the poetic imagination, 152; on the tragic katharsis, 273; on value, 138, 139; *Prometheus Unbound,* 161, 200, 202; *Skylark,* 181; *To the Moon,* 331
Sheridan, R. B., *Rivals,* 300, 301, 308
Sherman, S. P., 391
Sidney, Sir P., *Defense of Poesy,* 324
Sienkiewicz, H., 387
Sir Patrick Spens, 6, 342
Sitwell, Edith, *By White Wool Houses,* 29
Slang, 113
Smith, Sidney, on comedy, 311
Socrates, effect on tragedy, 268
Song of Roland, 361, 367
Sonnet, effectiveness in the, 150
Sophocles, *Ajax,* 259, 265 f., 273; *Antigone,* 251, 264, 274, 275; *Œdipus at Colonus,* 250, 265, 269; *Œdipus the King,* 244, 259, 263,

274, 275, 278; *Philoctetes,* 250, 259; tragedies, why in poetry, 87
Spencer, H., 209; on science, 215; on style, 80; *Principles of Psychology,* 218
Spenser, E., characters in *Faerie Queene,* 369; *Faerie Queene,* 360, 366; supernatural in *Faerie Queene,* 370
Spingarn, J. E., 16; *Creative Criticism,* 237; definition of lyric, 326; impressionism and value, 135, 136; on style, 78
Standardization, dangers of, 192 f.
Stelle, R., essays of, 351
Stendhal, Beyle H., on style, 80
Sterne, L., *Tristram Shandy,* 350
Stevenson, R. L., *Æs Triplex,* 375
Strassburg, G. von, *Parsifal,* 361, 378
Street, J., essays of, 353
Strindberg, J., tragedies of, 283
Style, 78 f.; for style's sake, 81
Swift, J., *Gulliver's Travels,* 297, 351
Swinburne, A. C., 12; *Atalanta in Calydon,* 48; rhythm, 104; style of, 80
Symbolism of poetry and prose, 95 f.
Symbols, bombast in, 75 f.; in art, 19 f.; of communication, 73 f.

Taine, H. A., and scientific criticism, 229
Tasso, T., *Gerusalemme Liberata,* 361, 368, 372
Tassoni, A., *Secchia Rapita,* 384
Taste, 127 f., 146
Tennyson, A. L., and science, 214; *Charge of the Light Brigade,* 159; imagery in, 115; style of, 82
Terence, 295
Thackeray, W. M., contrasted with Dickens, 33; essays of, 354; *Henry Esmond,* 233, 387, 395; on humor, 294; rhythm, 97; simplicity in use of symbols, 74; social novels, 389
Theocritus, eclogues, 240
Thomas of Celano, *Dies iræ,* 203
Thompson, Francis, *The Poppy,* 120
Thought, in poetry, 47 f.; pure, 65 f.
Toller, E., *Machine Wreckers,* 266
Tolstoy, L., 389; *Anna Karenina,* 251, 396; definition of art, 37; on art, 349, 405; on life, 143; on science and art, 224; on style, 80; the commonplace in *War and Peace,* 78; *What is Art?,* 403
Toplady, A. M., *Rock of Ages,* 180
Tradition, 127 f., 404
Tragedy, 245 f.; acting in, 254; a rebellion, 259 f.; chorus in, 253 f.; communal origin of, 253 f.; dénouement of, 250; enjoyment of, 249 f.; greatness in, 283; Greek tragedy, 258 f.; in Indian literature, 256 f.; irony in, 280 f.; of *Lear,* 249; of *Œdipus,* 250; pity and terror, 271 f.; theory of Aristotle, 269 f.; theory of Hegel, 262; theory of Nietzsche, 267 f.; theory of Schopenhauer, 264 f.; theories of the katharsis, 272 f.; tragedy a contest, 277 f.; tragedy and suffering, 279 f.; tragedy in Hebrew literature, 255 f.; tragedy not in the drama, 251; tragedy of *Job,* 249; tragic flaw, 275; tragic inevitability, 273 f.
Transcendentalism, 198 f.
Turgenev, I., 389
Twa Corbies, 331

Unities, laws of in tragedy, 284
Upanishads, The, 257

Valmiki, *Ramayana,* 274, 361, 373
Value, question of, 16, 123 f.
Victorian compromise, 215
Villon, F., *Ballade,* 339
Virgil, *Æneid* compared with *Chanson de Roland,* 395; and the epic, 363; character in *Æneid,* 369; descriptions in, 39; difficulties in, 31; *Eclogues* and *Georgics,* 347; epic value of, 376 f.; poetry in, 381; supernatural in, 371

Voltaire, *Henriad,* 361
Von Hoffmansthal, H., 3

Waller, E., *On a Girdle,* 334
Walpole, H., on comedy, 286
Ward, Mrs. H., 201
Watson, W., *April,* 339
Weaver, J. V. A., *The Foolish Plant,* 51
Wells, H. G., *New Utopia,* 299
Werner, R. M., *Lyrik und Lyriker,* 343
Wesley, C., 203
Whitehead, A. N., 208; *Science and the Modern World,* 218 f.
Whitman, W., *Drum Taps,* 333; *O Captain, My Captain,* 187; style of, 82; *When Lilacs Last in the Door-yard Bloomed,* 188
Wife of Ushers Well, The, 342
Wilde, O., *Lady Windermere's Fan,* 301; wit of, 309
Wit, 153 f.
Woodberry, G. E., definition of lyric, 327
Wordsworth, W., 191; and science, 214; *Cumberland Beggar,* 244; definition of poetry, 330; diction in, 109; *Evening on Calais Beach,* 151; *Lines Written Above Tintern Abbey,* 199, 244; *Ode on Intimations of Immortality,* 57, 345; odes, 157; on life, 143; on the lyric, 332; *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads,* 72; *Prelude,* 108, 198, 335; *The Daffodils,* 22, 244; *Upon Westminster Bridge,* 161

Zola, E., 389; *Le Roman Expérimental,* 228, 391